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GUN BOSS OF POWDER RIVER

GRIPPING NOVEL OF A WYOMING RANGE WAR BY WALT COBURN

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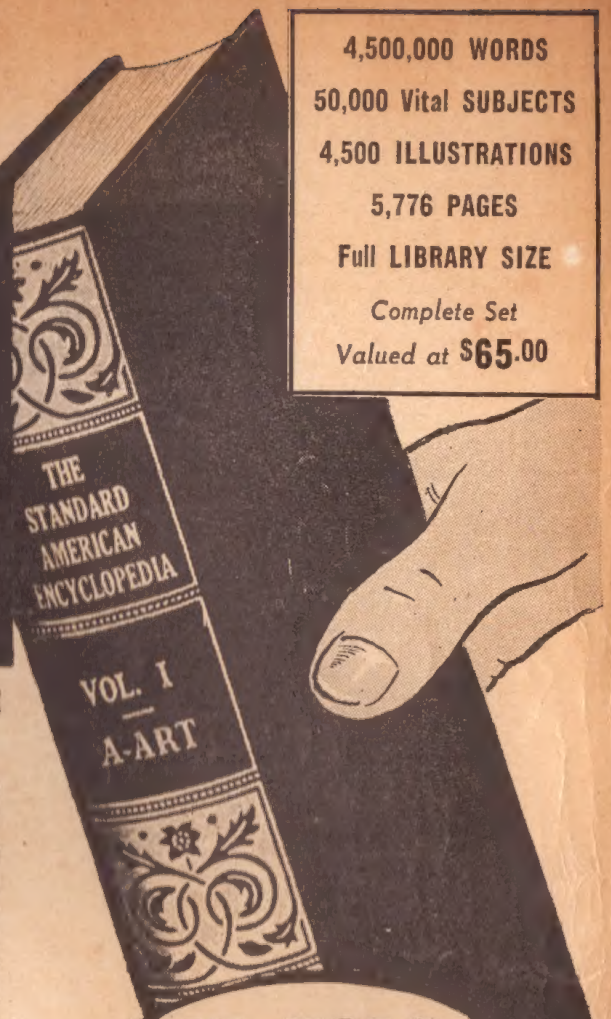

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WESTERN STORY

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CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 11, 1941 VOL. CLXXXVIII NO. 2

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BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF WARRING RANGE FACTIONS

GUN BOSS OF POWDER RIVER . . . . . **Walt Coburn** **9**

"The difference between you an' me is this, McQueen, I do my own killin'!" That was plain talk even for Lige Poe, most sinister of all the outlaws who came to Wolf Point to exchange hot lead for a range baron's cold cash. What kind of a murderous deal would he make?

A SERIAL

TRAIL OF THE THUNDERING HERDS . . . **Bennett Foster** **100**

Third of Six Parts

With a crew cut in half by the treachery of murdering mutineers, the Watrous trail herd—seventy thousand dollars' worth of prime beef—moves along, the potential prey of every renegade in the Nations. . . .

SHORT STORIES

BREAK-UP BONANZA . . . . . **Kenneth Gilbert** **45**

"Don't start anything with Bart Slade in Seven Up," Square-deal Simpson warned. But with his last dollar in the Big Beaver ice pool, Bill Staples started enough to turn that boom camp into hell's half acre!

OUTLAW'S RETURN . . . . . **Don Alviso** **56**

How could Dan O'Brien, riding back to the Tondro range to settle a gun score long overdue, keep that wild young maverick with big ideas from siding him?

KILLER MULE . . . . . **George Cory Franklin** . . **69**

Charged with man-fostered meanness, Smoky was a four-footed fury with one object in life—vengeance!

BALLOTS FOR BOOTHILL . . . . . **Peter Dawson** **77**

Red Lee knew he'd better not vote in Rawhide's election unless his ballot was backed by a lightning-fast trigger finger and plenty of scorching lead. . . .

WESTERN STORY FEATURES

RANGE SAVVY . . . . . **H. Fredric Young** **68**

Cattle country facts and legends.

VOYAGEURS . . . . . **Dan Shaw** **76**

Life was fraught with adventure for those intrepid men who transported furs down treacherous waterways to the frontier town of St. Louis. . . .

DEPARTMENTS

THE ROUNDUP . . . . . **The Editor** **5**
GUNS AND GUNNERS . . . . . **Phil Sharpe** **91**
MINES AND MINING . . . . . **John A. Thompson** . . . **93**
WHERE TO GO AND HOW TO GET THERE . **John North** **95**
THE HOLLOW TREE . . . . . **Helen Rivers** **97**

COVER BY H. W. SCOTT

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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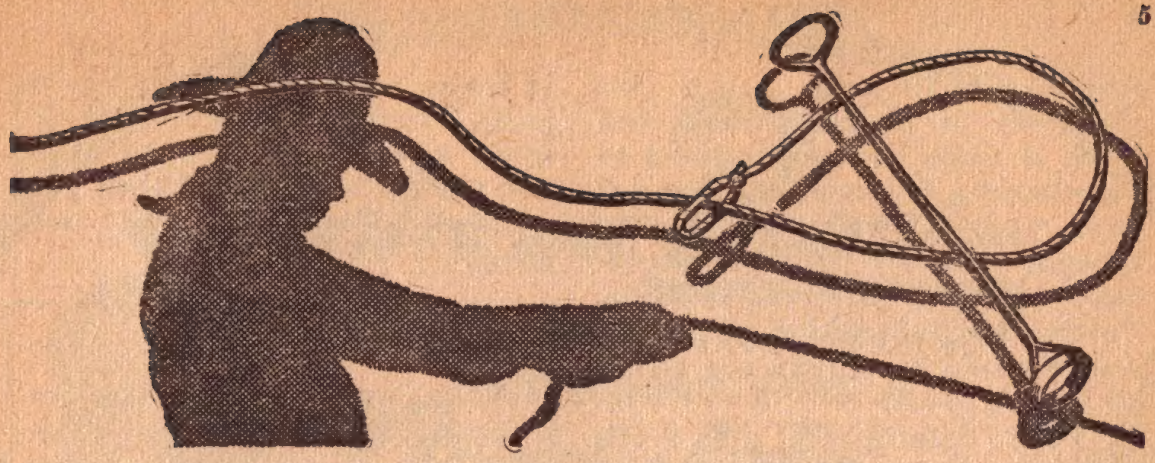

The Roundup

MR. W. WOOTEN, JR., of Cortez, Colorado, hazes some firsthand dope into the Roundup parley that has been going on for some time over Ol' Curlyhorn. Here's his letter in full:

"I have been a constant reader of Western Story farther back than I can remember the date. It seems to me that it has changed names once or twice years ago. I change addresses so often that I can't subscribe for it yearly, but buy it from magazine stands.

"Now to get to the point of this epistle: My dad taught me never to criticize or find fault with the efforts of others unless I could do better and was sure they were wrong. Starting with the August 3rd issue and Mr. Saul P. Barber's disagreement on the weight of Kenneth Gilbert's Old Curlyhorn weighing close to four hundred pounds, if Mr. Barber will come to Colorado I can show him big rams that will weigh better than three hundred pounds. They do grow larger in different localities. In fact I have been within a few feet of one ram that I firmly believe would weigh four hundred pounds.

"As for the gentleman who criticized the age of L. L. Foreman's adobe walls—well, I am now living in the Mesa Verde country and there are old ruins here that contain adobe, whose walls were built in the sixteenth century and are still standing.

"I say, let's read these wonderful stories in Western Story for interest, entertainment and for the story's sake. Not for the authenticity of each and every statement.

"I believe that all these criticizers will admit, taking these stories as a whole, that they are the most authentic, interesting and contain more true probabilities of happenings in the building of the West than any in their line.

"Hope to see more of Kenneth Gilbert's short stories of animal life in future issues."

Thanks, Mr. Wooten. That sounds like the last word to us, on both rams and adobe.

We don't generally like anonymous letters, but, because of the content, we are giving you a look at one from "Anonymous Annie:"

"I've been reading Western Story for some time, rather erratically I must admit, but I do all my reading that way. I have only one kick coming. It seems to me there is an overdose of damns and hells floating around. There are a lot of youngsters who peruse the pages of your

magazine. Running across the slight bit of profanity they soon think it quite the proper thing to experiment a little with it. Some of your readers seem to demand it, though, especially those old crustaceans who sleep with their socks on. Putting the proposition up to the reader would bring only one result, all yeas in favor.

"Your departments are great, especially Guns and Gunners by Phil Sharpe.

"I thought perhaps you might like to hear from an old reader even if it was a wee suggestion of reform. Maybe if you slowly weaned the old mossyhorns off the invectives, they would never know the difference. Anyway, you've got the best Western in the business."

We'd like to hear from a lot of readers on the question raised here. We don't go in for much of very strong cussing in our stories, but at times it seems more natural and realistic for a character to say something a little stronger than "dog-gone." But we'd like to know what other readers, including the old crustaceans, think. We are certainly much obliged for what the following reader thinks:

"I have no fault to find," writes W. F., of Bridgeton, New Jersey, "in fact nothing but praise. I think your magazine is as near perfect as possible in every respect.

"I have one request to make—that you will keep your departments as you now have them, that is, each department on a page (single) so it can be taken out easily and catalogued for future use. I have made scrapbooks of departments Where to Go and How to Get There, The Hollow Tree and Mines and Mining. Have just completed Mines and Mining to date and catalogued as to States. Some of your lost mines pages I have had to copy a lot so I could pass Western on to others and not cut out some of their good reading. Keep the good work going."

In next week's big issue—

"Nothing's bad enough for the Yuma Kid; he's the most cold-blooded, unprincipled killer I ever had anything to do with. And he'll pay for his crimes!" vowed Steve Mallory. But how did this daring young range detective expect to round up a phantom murderer whose panther cry had already marked the doom of six men? You'll find the pulse-quickening answer to that question in Jay Lucas' thrill-packed novel—GHOST OF THE YUMA KID.

Both Jim Starling and Red Faraday wore quick-trigger guns that could be bought—but were they hiring out to a treacherous range grabber whose plans included dry-gulch murder? On their decision rested the lives of many men. Learn what it was in L. P. Holmes' dramatic action yarn—GUN-SWIFT RETRIBUTION.

When Hep Gallegher drops in on W. S., trouble can't be far behind. This time Glenn Wichman's bad-luck buckaroo is all tangled up in a cow-country carnival. Don't miss HEP AND THE DOG-FACED MAN, folks—it's better than a side show.

Next week's Western Story also brings you gripping stories of the range by S. Omar Barker, Wayne D. Overholser, Bennett Foster and many other top Western writers, plus, of course, a full string of departments and features.

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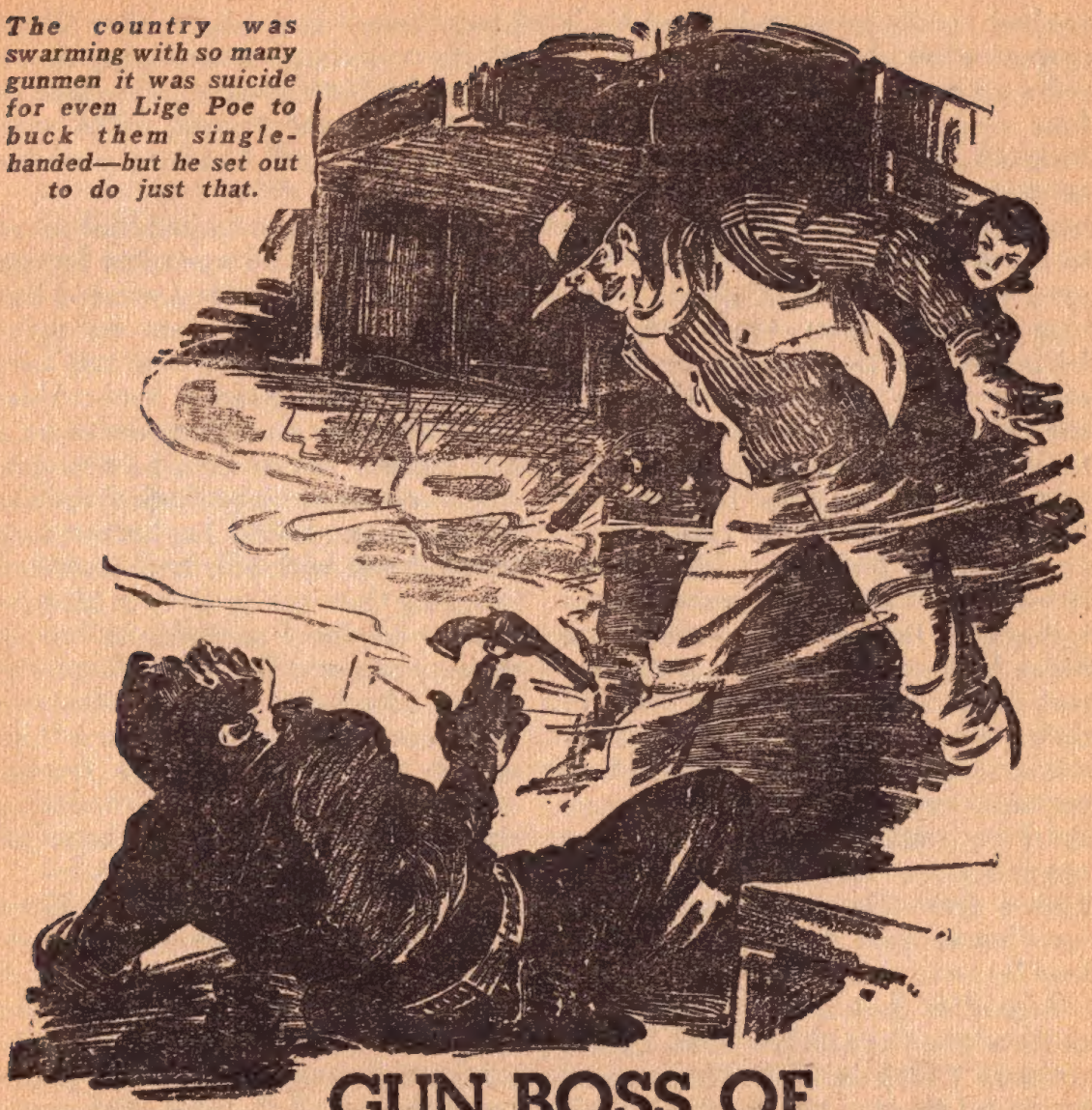
The country was swarming with so many gunmen it was suicide for even Lige Poe to buck them single-handed—but he set out to do just that.



GUN BOSS OF POWDER RIVER

BY WALT COBURN

CHAPTER I

HIRED KILLERS GO TO WORK

THE "rustling of the leaves" along the Outlaw Trail said that there was a big cattle war about to bust wide open in Wyoming and that a fast man with a gun could make a quick big stake if he hired out the right outfit. And so it was that some hard-looking strangers were riding into Wolf Point and most of them

packed saddle guns and timed their arrival after dark. They rode in pairs or little bunches of three or four and when they met at Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon they met as strangers might meet. For the most part they stayed sober enough to shoot fast and straight, and they eyed one another with a cold wariness and distrust; there was no friendship or trust given or taken among those renegades who rode the Outlaw Trail with a bounty on their hides. They came from such places as the Hole in the Wall in Wyoming, from the Hide-away across the Montana line, from Brown's Park in the Colorado Mountains, and Robbers' Roost in Utah. Some were tough and had a clean sort of courage. Others were out to make a hard reputation for themselves as killers. These, lacking real courage, were far more dangerous than the outlaws whose ways they aped because they would do their killing from the brush and afterward cover their murders with whiskey lies.

Lige Poe had come from as far south along the Outlaw Trail as the Animas Valley in New Mexico and he rode alone. He reached Wolf Point about midnight and when he had put up his horse he hid his saddle gun where he could get it in a tight. Having taken off his brush and cactus-scarred bullhide chaps, he tied his six-shooter holster low on his right thigh with a buckskin string. Then he walked slowly up the street to Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon.

Lige Poe was somewhere in his early thirties. He was tall, and his long muscles were as hard and pliable as braided rawhide. His hair was thick and as coarse and black as an Indian's. He had lean, flat jaws and a hawk-beaked nose. His heavy black brows met above the bridge of his nose and a drooping black mustache hid the square corners of his tight-lipped mouth. His eyes were as gray and bleak as a winter sky.

Lige Poe seldom smiled and never laughed. When he was sober he was soft-spoken and quiet-mannered but whiskey turned him into an ugly-tempered braggart who told tall tales about his ability as a bronc rider and fast roper and his prowess as a gun fighter. And when he was getting over one of his periodical drunks he brooded and sulked as his memory taunted him with this loud-mouthed bragging that was so alien to his customary modesty and almost boyish shyness in a crowd. And so Lige Poe drifted along dim trails to cross new horizons where no man knew him and it was as if he were forever driven by some black haunting shadow that he tried to shake off but could never lose.

Men called Lige Poe a killer. Even outlaw campfires in places like Robbers' Roost or the Hole in the Wall held no welcome, no warmth for this lone rider of the dim trails. Even the toughest outlaw gangs stood in awe of the man who could outride, outrope, outshoot all of them but who never spoke of his ability as a cowhand or gun fighter unless he was drunk.

LIGE POE saw the saddled horses at the hitch racks along the street that was dark save for the patches of light coming from the windows and doorways of Wolf Point's half-dozen saloons. He heard men shouting and singing and he heard the squeak of fiddles, the wheezy melody of accordions and the discordant pounding of tinny pianos out of tune. Wolf Point was a boom cattle town and it was crowded with

all sorts of men. Cowpunchers, gun fighters, tinhorn gamblers, drifters, bums, dance-hall percentage girls.

Texas had sent up many trail herds and the Wyoming range was overstocked with longhorn cattle. Wolf Point was wide open and tough and because of this invasion of men from the outlaw hangouts there was no law tonight in the little cow town. There was a range war brewing and the men behind it were men with political power and unlimited money behind them, so the rustling of the leaves had told it as far south as the Animas Valley in New Mexico where Lige Poe had heard its whisper.

Big Mike's Last Chance was crowded. Lige Poe's bleak eyes took it all in as he stood at the end of the bar with his right hand near his ivory-handled six-shooter. His quick scrutiny found the faces of men he knew and many others he had never before laid eyes on. A few of them nodded covert recognition but their eyes slid away from his cold scrutiny. And before Big Mike had slid an empty glass and the bar bottle toward him the dread name of Lige Poe had swept over the crowd like a chill wind. Voices dropped to lower tones. The shrill tipsy laughter of percentage girls faded. Men who knew him feigned interest in their cards or dancing or drinking. Strangers who had never seen Lige Poe stared at him.

Big Mike was a quart-a-day man but he had the ears of a fox and the sharp eye of an eagle. He was the contact man for the big shots who had sent out word that renegade guns were for hire at Wolf Point. He wiped a big hand on his soiled bar apron and shoved it across the bar. The wide grin on his whiskey-red face went no further than his mouth and cunning glinted in his bloodshot green eyes.

"The boss will be in town tomorrow," he told the newcomer. "Drink hearty. It's on the house."

Lige Poe poured his drink with his left hand. He did not seem to see Big Mike's offered hand and the saloon man's grin faded a little as he pulled it slowly back.

There was a battered-looking piano on a raised platform. On it a lantern-jawed, pasty-faced "professor," a glass of whiskey within reach, a sodden, half-smoked cigarette hanging from a corner of his mouth, was playing "Auld Lang Syne." A black-haired girl in a red dress who was standing beside the piano singing the song looked too fresh and young and clean to be in Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon.

Equally out of place here was the big clean-shaven, red-faced young pilgrim in the corduroy hunting coat and the boots, breeches and hat of a Canadian Northwest Mounty. He was a little tipsy and his blue eyes were bloodshot. He stood on the other side of the piano, a wad of money in his hand, staring at the girl, listening to her song, giving her his rapt attention. The song or the girl or both was making the big dude forget that he was being watched by the crowd whose attention was now divided by the whispered news that Lige Poe was in the saloon and had come to sell his quick-triggered gun to the highest bidder.

The girl, however, sensed that something was happening. Her eyes, black-gray under heavy lashes, swept the crowd as she sang. Then she was looking across the room and straight at Lige Poe.

Her face paled and her voice faltered. She gripped the top of the piano as if she needed it to brace her. Then her red lips smiled stiffly and she went on singing and her eyes

and smile went back to the big young man who was as British as if he stood there waving the Union Jack.

"That's His Nibs," Big Mike's whiskey voice informed Poe. "The Laird of Powder River. Thinks he's the cattle king of Wyoming. The danged remittance man hasn't sense enough to know that Pina's makin' a sucker outa him. His Nibs is in the way. A couple of boys from the Hole in the Wall is takin' care of him. That's them now—"

Two hard-looking cowpunchers had shouldered through the crowd. They picked up the girl in the red dress and swung her up on top of their shoulders. She clawed and fought like a wild cat. The big young Britisher started for them. They tossed the girl to the top of the piano and jerked their guns. The Laird of Powder River charged them with his bare fists and the girl in the red dress screamed at him:

"Don't! Cowan! They'll kill you! Don't!"

Half a dozen men rushed the big Britisher, their gun barrels swinging. The Laird of Powder River stood on widespread legs and his big arms were flailing. But the hard-faced gunhands were clubbing him down with their six-shooters. One man, one unarmed man, against half a dozen hired killers.

The girl in the red dress was so white now that the paint on her cheeks stood out like red lumps. Her voice, shrill, frantic, shouted across the crowd. *"Lige!"*

LIGE POE went in fighting, the bottle of whiskey gripped in his left hand, his six-shooter in his right. He moved fast and hit hard. He smashed the bottle across one man's head and his gun barrel cracked another behind the ears. His white teeth were bared in a thin-lipped snarl and he fought with a cold fury that carried him through the crowd and to the side of the big Britisher.

The Laird of Powder River was battling with stubborn, gallant coolness. His hat had been knocked off and his tawny head was reddening with blood that poured from a scalp wound and down across his face. Out of that mask of blood his eyes showed blue and bright and without fear.

A gun roared and a bullet nicked the Britisher's cheek. The gun in Lige Poe's hand spat fire and the man who had tried to kill the Laird of Powder River clawed at a bullet-smashed shoulder. Lige Poe's gun roared twice and two more renegades with guns in their hands went down. Then Lige yanked the girl from the top of the piano and flung her at the big Britisher.

"Take 'er out the back door, you big blockhead! Git 'im outa here pronto, Pina, you danged little troublemaker. Git!"

Lige Poe's six-shooter belched fire. His two bullets smashed the two swinging lamps that hung from the ceiling and the saloon was plunged in sudden darkness. Guns blazed at close quarters as some of the renegades took advantage of the blackness to settle old scores. Lige had hold of the girl with one hand and his other hand gripped the neck of the Britisher's corduroy coat and the the three of them went out the back door of the saloon.

The girl led the way and they kept to the shadows. The Britisher tried to say something but Lige Poe shut him up with a snarl.

"Git your horse and hit the trail. Buy a gun and learn to use it and if you've got the sense of a half-wit you'll stay clear of these honkatonk gals. Like as not she's got your

roll in her stockin' right now. She'll split it with Big Mike. She works thataway."

The Laird of Powder River had one arm around the girl's shoulders and was wiping the blood from his eyes with his free hand. Lige Poe left them standing there and walked away. He stopped in the shadow of a building and reloaded his six-shooter. A moment later he saw the big Britisher ride off into the night and watched the girl run down the alley and vanish in the black shadows.

CHAPTER II

LIGE POE WRITES HIS TICKET

WHEN the lights went on again in Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon Lige Poe strode out into the street and went back into the saloon by way of the front door.

Big Mike was restoring order in a thorough manner, a six-shooter in one hand and a heavy wooden mallet known among the barroom fraternity as a bung-starter gripped in his other hand. His two bouncers were yielding double-barreled sawed-off shotguns.

There were several men with cracked heads and gunshot wounds. A grizzled doctor who acted half drunk and needed a shave and haircut was getting to them as best he could. Three men had been killed and their dead bodies were being carried into a back room.

Lige Poe stepped through the swinging half-doors and stood there with his back to the wall and his six-shooter in his hand. There was a faint smile twisting his mouth and his bleak eyes were narrowed. His voice broke across an uneasy silence as men stared at him.

"Half a dozen men jumped a big pilgrim that didn't have a gun and I taken his part. I had to kill two men and I know 'em both and know their records. Now if those two snakes left ary friends behind to take it up for 'em, here I am. Fill your hands and I'll accommodate you!"

Those nearest Poe began to edge

away. They shook their heads and grinned uneasily.

"You kin deal me out, Poe," said one of the men who came from Robbers' Roost. "All I want's a drink."

Others voiced a similar opinion. There was a leering grin on Big Mike's whiskey-bloated face as he stepped around behind the bar.

"Belly up to the mahogany, you sons!" he bellowed, his whiskey-husked voice trying to sound hearty. "This round is on the house. Boys will be boys and the damages is counted up to profit and loss."

Lige Poe wasn't drinking. He stood at the end of the bar with his back against the side wall and men shunned him as if he had the plague. He watched the men who had carried away the dead gunnies as they came in from the back room. They were from the Hole in the Wall and the only dangerous hombre among them was a short, swarthy man who walked with a limp and looked as though he might be part

Indian. Lige Poe motioned to him.

"Anything stickin' in your craw, Choctaw?" he inquired mildly.

"I was playin' stud hoss poker when the play come up, Poe. Had an ace in the hole and I'd just paired it. You mebbeso lost me a pot or chances are the tinhorn bankin' the game would have beat me." A grin spread across the short man's swarthy face as he pulled a handful of poker chips from his pocket and stacked them on the bar.

"Cash these, Mike, and don't start cryin' about it. And the next time you hire my men to do a job come to me to make the deal. I never gave no orders to start this ruckus."

Big Mike shoved some money across the bar and raked in the poker chips. He was grinning but his bloodshot green eyes were full of menace.

"If His Nibs had been tromped to death accidental in that ruckus, Choctaw, you'd have come around tomorrow for a big cut of the pay-off."

His left hand took the bottle that the swarthy Choctaw was reaching for, and at almost the same instant his right hand palmed a small double-barreled derringer pistol. The heavy-calibered little gun was pointed at Choctaw's chest.

"Do the rest of your drinkin' somewheres else," Big Mike ordered. "It's agin' the law to serve likker to Injuns. Git out!"

The half-breed looked at the derringer, then at the big saloon man. Then at one of the bouncers who stood a few feet behind him with a sawed-off shotgun. He grinned at Lige Poe, his black eyes glittering.

"I've heard it said, Poe, that you was an eighth or quarter-breed Cherokee. First thing you know Big Mike will put you on his Injun list. If you're stayin' around this part of the country I'll be cuttin' your trail before long. Me'n my men has hired out to Wade McQueen, the man that sent for you, mebbe."

"Nobody sent for me, Choctaw," Lige Poe said flatly. "And I'll try to take care that I sight you first when our trails cross."

Choctaw grinned. He motioned with a jerk of his head to several men from the Hole in the Wall. Then he looked across the bar at Big Mike.

"I'll drop around to see you when the sign's right, Mike."

He limped out the door, a six-shooter swinging from each thigh and his dusty black hat slanted across his black eyes. Four or five tough-looking gun-toters followed him.

BIG MIKE glared after him, the derringer in his hand. The two bouncers kept Choctaw and his men covered with their shotguns until they had left the place. The saloon man shrugged his heavy shoulders and grinned at Lige Poe.

"I never liked that breed. I cleaned the house for you, Poe. They'd have ganged you before the night was over."

"I never asked you to take up anything for me, mister."

"The boss left orders to treat you right. You're makin' it tough on me, Poe. Sidin' that doggone remittance man helped nobody. The Laird of Powder River is a trouble-maker. He done a hitch with the Mounties and never got over it. Thinks he's the big boss around here, and he ain't got the guts to pack a gun. I've told him to keep outa here but he's stuck on that black-headed gal. Won't let her look at another man. He's bad for the business. And the boss don't like him. All I wanted was for them boys to

toss him out on his thick head. If I'd wanted him killed I'd have had the bouncers do the job. Hang it, how was I to know you'd wade in and side the beef eater?

"'Lige Poe is on his way,' the boss tells me. 'When he gits here, treat him right. He's worth a corral full of these two-bit badmen. Poe's writin' his own ticket. He'll spit in that Mounty's eye and scare him so bad he won't quit runnin' till he's acrost the Canadian line. His Nibs will swim the ocean to git back to England, he'll be that boogered when Lige Poe shows up.'

"That's what the boss tells me. Cowan Campbell's had a chance to sell his ranch and git. But he's bull-headed and won't do it. He ain't got a snowball's chance in hell against the boss when this war busts. Wade McQueen gits what he goes after. String your bets with him and you'll wear diamonds, Poe. Cross him up and the coyotes will howl on your grave. I'm tellin' you this for your own good. I know you didn't savvy when you went in to side His Nibs. So I'm puttin' you onto the ropes."

Big Mike was leaning across the bar and his voice was a whiskey whisper. Others at the bar had backed away out of earshot to give the saloon man his chance to feed Lige Poe a confidential talk.

"Where is this big feller's ranch?" asked Poe.

"Twenty miles north of here where Powder River and Crazy Woman branches. Its the old Pitchfork Ranch. Cowan Campbell bought in with Jim Pickett two years ago. Then Pickett got killed and Campbell turned down the boss' offer to buy him out at a fair price. Have a drink and we'll fergit the ruckus. Here's a bottle of Wade McQueen's private likker. It's—"

Lige Poe turned and walked away. Big Mike scowled at him, muttering under his breath as the tall cowpuncher from the Animas country in New Mexico strode out through the swinging doors.

"Why, the surly son!" Big Mike put the special bottle on the back bar and poured himself a drink.

"That's a horse on you, Mike," chuckled a big, sandy-haired renegade from Robbers' Roost. "What was you tryin' to sell Lige Poe?"

"I was wisin' him up to a few things, Sandy. Puttin' him onto the ropes. And he walked away from me like I was a bait of wolf poison."

Sandy Sanders' blue-gray eyes crinkled. "Lige Poe don't thank any man for advice. He travels his own trail. You can't bluff him. You can't scare him. And you can't buy him."

Sanders took a roll of bills from his pocket. There was a wide grin on his square-jawed, blunt-nosed face.

"I got about a thousand dollars here, Mike. Any part of it says that Lige Poe ain't throwin' in with Wade McQueen and McQueen's politico friends."

"What do you mean, Sanders?"

"I mean that from what I seen a little while ago when your hired hands from the Hole in the Wall tried to tromp the Laird of Powder River to death and didn't, Lige Poe has done bought chips in the game. And he'll bet his hands like he's holdin' all the aces in the deck." Sanders commenced counting the roll of bills. "A thousand dollars bets that Lige Poe stands at Cowan Campbell's back till his belly caves in. Want it?"

"It's a bet," Big Mike said. "Not even Lige Poe kin buck Wade McQueen and McQueen's friends."

CHAPTER III

SUNRISE SHOWDOWN

"WHICH is Wade McQueen's private horse?" Lige Poe asked the sleepy, half-drunken barn man.

"That big bay geldin' in the box stall. Best horse in Wyoming or any man's country."

Poe shoved a twenty-dollar bill into the man's hand. "Go on back to sleep."

He had his bridle in his hand as he walked into the box stall. The barn man blinked his eyes. Then he growled something and reached for his gun. Poe swung a long, hard looping left that caught the man on the jaw and dropped him on the dirt floor of the barn where he lay like a dead man. Poe dragged him out of the way and stuffed the twenty-dollar bill in the sweatband of his hat, then dropped the hat over his face. Then Poe saddled the big bay and shoved his carbine in the saddle scabbard.

The sleek, grain-fed bay was what the cow country calls a one-man horse. Lige Poe pulled his hat down tight and swung into the saddle. The horse stood still for a second or two, then Poe felt him stiffen between his legs. Suddenly the big bay quit the ground pitching and squealing, and headed straight down the street past the lights of half a dozen saloons, past Big Mike's Last Chance.

Big Mike's two tough bouncers came out, six-shooters in their hands. The saloonman was behind them, his face almost purple with fury, his whiskey voice bellowing orders:

"Don't hit the horse! Don't hit McQueen's horse! Git that double-crossin'—"

But a man riding a pitching horse is no easy target. They had to shoot high for fear of hitting Wade McQueen's top horse.

The ivory-handled six-shooter in Lige Poe's hand was spewing flame. The big bay had too much thoroughbred blood and not enough range bronc in him to buck hard. He was pitching straight ahead and Poe was riding easy. He would thumb back the hammer of his gun and pull the trigger every time the big bay's four feet hit the ground. Big Mike and his two burly bouncers were not hard targets. A .45 slug hit one of

the bouncers in the shoulder and spun him sideways. A second bullet hit the other bouncer in the thigh and he went down cursing. Big Mike jumped back inside and a couple of slugs crashed through the big saloon windows.

Poe pulled the big bay's head up and the horse broke into a run. In no time the night swallowed horse and rider. Poe let the horse run for a mile before he pulled him down to an easy lope and reloaded his empty six-shooter. He headed north along the trail that would take him to the Pitchfork Ranch at the forks

The Laird of Powder River didn't stand a chance when that crew of hired killers ganged him —and then Lige Poe went into action!

of Powder River and Crazy Woman.

The big bay steadied down to a long trot that ate up the miles. Poe had a good head start on anybody who might be following him. But he doubted if any of that crowd at the saloon would try to overtake him. The Hole in the Wall bunch and Choctaw had already left town. So he'd have to keep an eye open for any ambush. The country was open. Flats and low ridges, coulees and benchlands.

The only real tough man in that crowd at Big Mike's Last Chance was Sandy Sanders, Poe told himself. But Sandy wouldn't be trailing him. Sandy might meet him in some kind of a big ruckus where they were fighting on opposite sides and they'd do their shooting clean and fair. That was Sandy's way. They had worked for the same out-

fits in Texas and Arizona and New Mexico and Lige Poe had saved Sandy's life once in a nasty gun scrap across the Mexican border when they were making a few easy dollars fetching wet cattle out of Chihuahua when the moon was right. A man could trust Sandy Sanders as far as he could trust any renegade outlaw. And none of the others Lige Poe had recognized in the saloon had the guts to close-trail a man.

Poe discounted them and the risks of being overtaken. He was riding the best horse he had ever forked in his life. This big bay was a ridge runner and he was covering fast miles in the moonlight.

He wondered what had fetched Pina to Wyoming. The last time he had seen her she was singing songs like "Annie Laurie" and "My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean" at the Bird Cage Opera House in Tombstone and was billed as Pina from Carolina. And the high-rolling spenders of that turbulent wild and woolly Tombstone were tossing gold pieces from the boxes and onto the stage at her feet until it looked like a shower of gold.

LIGE POE'S black brows knitted and his bleak eyes clouded with brooding memory. He was remembering that first and last night they had met. Pina had worn a white silk dress and a red rose in her hair. He had sat in the box with Wyatt Earp who was marshal of Tombstone and Doc Holliday who was the deadliest man he had ever met and Pina had joined them but she had hardly tasted the champagne they had ordered for her. Later they had walked together, Lige Poe and Pina, out across the hills and there had been a round white moon and the stars had come down low. Lige had picked her up in his arms and carried her over the sharp rocks and cactus because she was wearing high-heeled slippers and silk stockings. It was Christmas night and for once in his life when the whiskey was setting his brain afire Lige Poe had forgotten to brag and boast and instead they had sat there on a hill beyond the edge of town and he had put his coat around her shoulders and they had talked of little things that belonged back in their childhood. Of Pina's first doll and Lige Poe's first pair of red-topped boots, and of when they both believed in Santa Claus. And then they had watched the sunrise above the broken Arizona skyline and he had held her in his arms. They had made promises to one another. Then he had carried her back over the rocks and she had caught the stagecoach just about to pull out of Tombstone.

That had been five years ago. Pina had broken the promise she had made to meet him a week later at Santa Fe. Lige had been three days late because he had been stopped at Tuscon and had to shoot his way out of some trouble there. But Pina hadn't waited and he had lost her trail there and never been able to pick it up again until now. Until tonight in Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon at Wolf Point, Wyoming, where he had found her singing her songs to a drunken mob of renegade gun fighters and a big, red-faced remittance man who had served a hitch in the Mounties and called himself the Laird of Powder River.

Lige Poe didn't realize it was getting daylight. The sound of shooting somewhere ahead jerked him out of his brooding. He pulled up and looked down from the high ridge. He saw the forks of the two rivers. Cot-

tonwood trees. Log buildings and corrals. Tiny puffs of powder smoke from behind patches of brush.

That was the Pitchfork Ranch below and somebody was smoking it up. And Lige Poe was skylighted there in the dawn. He realized it when a bullet whined past his head. He whirled the big bay and yanked at his saddle gun. He saw the puff of powder smoke from a patch of brush out on the ridge about a hundred yards away where a lookout man had been left on guard. The man was too drunk or too rattled to shoot straight and Poe rode straight at the brush patch, shooting as he spurred the big bay to a run. There was a yelp of pain and the wounded bushwhacker threshed around behind the brush. Poe's carbine cracked again and the man rolled out in the open grabbing at his middle with both hands. Poe's third shot stiffened him and he lay over on his back with his jaw slacked and blood spilling from his mouth and his glazing eyes staring up at the sky. Poe rode in behind the brush and swung from the saddle.

THE guns a few hundred yards below were cracking and bullets whined all around Poe and the bay horse as he rode in behind the shelter of the brush. He swung from his saddle and dropped to one knee. His carbine spat and cracked as he raised his sights to the five-hundred-yard notch. The range was long and he had no hope of doing much damage. But he had the advantage of looking down on his enemies and spotting their shelters where they were bushed up in a wide circle surrounding the ranch buildings. He counted half a dozen different brush patches where gun smoke betrayed the hiding places of the men who were giving Cowan Campbell an early-morning surprise. And he began smoking them out of the brush one at a time. He heard yelling and recognized the Indian war whoop of the half-breed Choctaw and so identified the men below.

Choctaw had left this man on guard up here on the ridge but the fellow had dozed off. There was a half-emptied quart of whiskey near his dead body. Liquor can make a coward into a brave man but its tricky stuff. The renegade on guard had taken on too much and had gone to sleep and so failed to warn Choctaw and the others below in time to give them a chance for a clean getaway. And he had been too muddle-brained to shoot straight when he had a chance to knock his target out of the saddle.

Now Lige Poe squatted behind the shelter of the brush on a sort of sandstone rimrock and with a cold-blooded, deadly, businesslike precision he raised his rear sight to the right notch and his bullets began to drive Choctaw and his Hole in the Wall regenades from their buck-brush ambush spots. One at a time. The killer from the Animas range in New Mexico paused to shove fresh cartridges into the box magazine of his .30-40 Winchester and, judging from his complete lack of animation or excitement, he might have been shooting at some set wooden target.

Lige Poe was using one of the cavalry-type carbines and it was a gun that had been selected by proven tests on an army-post rifle range as the most accurate gun out of a hundred of the same type. The visibility in the early dawn was fair. He asked for no better light. When he smoked the first man out from behind his buck-brush shelter he let him ride away without trying to kill him and watched him ride off. Then Poe opened up on the

second brush patch, not shooting to kill. He was letting them get away. Smoking them out one at a time. Driving them out into the open and letting them ride away. Then sending half a dozen bullets into the next brush patch.

There was a streak of crimson in the sky where the sun was starting to climb above the ragged skyline. Lige Poe was waiting until he smoked Choctaw from his bushwhacker shelter. Bullets whined and ricocheted as they hit the sandstone and angled off into the air above his head. They couldn't hit him. He was too well protected and only a part of his head and his gun barrel edged above the protecting rimrock.

Poe reckoned he'd know Choctaw by the way the half-breed rode. He counted four men as he drove them out into the open and watched them ride hard to get out of range. He lay flat on his stomach now with his carbine barrel laid along the rimrock ledge and fired five quick shots at a patch of buck brush. His white teeth bared in a mirthless grin as he recognized the man who broke from the brush with his horse spurred to a dead run. Quirting over and under and lying low along the neck of his horse. That was his man. No other man rode like the half-breed called Choctaw.

Lige Poe lined his sights but he didn't squeeze the trigger. He didn't kill Choctaw. He jumped to his feet and waved his hat and lifted his voice in a loud shout.

"Head for your hole, you yellow-bellied coyote! Run for your hole, Choctaw! Tell your men what a brave hombre you are in a tight! Tell 'em that Lige Poe give you back your life!

Lige Poe stood there on the rimrock on widespread legs and emptied his carbine at the fleeing rider. Each bullet that came from his smoking gun barrel kicked up a little puff of dust ten feet behind the running horse.

Then Poe got on the big bay horse that wore the Q brand of Wade McQueen and rode down the trail to the Pitchfork Ranch. He took with him the cartridge belt and six-shooter and carbine of the dead man on the rimrock ridge. He had turned the dead man's horse loose. He had pillowed the dead renegade's head on his saddle and covered his face with a sweaty saddle blanket. Last of all, he had put a white poker chip on the dead man's forehead.

If there had been a man left there behind the brush, he could easily have shot Lige Poe from his saddle as he rode down the slanting trail to the Pitchfork Ranch. But no gun crash broke the silence of the sunrise. A meadow lark sang and Lige Poe's bleak eyes clouded as he heard the song.

He had no smile, no word of greeting for Cowan Campbell who opened the door of his log house and came out into the open.

CHAPTER IV

WHITE CHIPS—DEAD MEN

THE Laird of Powder River was wearing his tight-fitting black breeches with the wide yellow stripe down the outer seam, his English boots and a clean white shirt. There was a white bandage spotted with dried blood tied around his head and in the dawn his clean-jawed face looked a little gray. He wore no gun and his lips had lost their color when he tried to grin.

"I say, old man—" he began uncertainly.

Poe threw the cartridge belt with

its holstered six-shooter on the ground at the Britisher's feet. Then he leaned from his saddle and handed Cowan Campbell the carbine that belonged to the dead man on the hill.

"You owe me a hundred dollars," Poe said flatly. "No more, no less. If you know how to boil water without burnin' it, I kin use some coffee with whiskers on it. And plantin' that feller on the rimrock is your job. He's tallied with a white chip. Save it to keep your books straight. There'll be more from time to time. Dead men. White chips. I cash 'em in for a hundred dollars a chip and you pay cash. I hope you've got the cash, mister, because I can't take it out in trade. You haven't got a thing I want, savvy? Not even your ranch or your horses or your cattle—or the woman that sings you 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

He rode on to the barn. Cowan Campbell stared after him, his blue eyes bright and shining in the crimson sunrise. He wanted to say something. Ask questions. Offer his hand in friendship to the man who had saved his ranch and his life. But there was nothing that the Laird of Powder River could say to Lige Poe. Not now. Perhaps never. The bleakness of the killer's eyes stopped any word a man like Cowan Campbell could think of now.

Campbell picked up the cartridge belt and guns and carried them into the log house that he had built and furnished to suit his taste, fashioning it after the hunting lodges in the Northwest. A huge stone fireplace at one end of the big living room, log walls, Indian rugs, mounted trophy heads and an old English hunting print.

The ashes in the fireplace were cold. The stove in the kitchen held no warmth. Dust had gathered on the hand-hewn, leather-cushioned furniture and the pots and pans and china dishes in the kitchen were crusted with the leavings of badly cooked food.

The Laird of Powder River was alone here, deserted by the men he had hired to ride after his cattle

and lastly by the Chinaman who had tended to his house. He was trying to get a fire started in the kitchen stove when Lige Poe came in.

"Doggone it, you can't even build a fire. Didn't *anybody* have the guts to stay with you?"

Lige Poe laughed. The sound matched the bleakness of his eyes. Cowan Campbell's red face flushed even redder and he forced a smile.

"McQueen scared them off," he explained. "You can't blame the poor beggars for not sticking. McQueen's hoodlums have rather brutal ways of terrorizing chaps. My men knew that my partner Jim Pickett had been murdered. Whenever they rode away from the ranch they were shot at. They wanted to remain loyal but sticking to me meant

death, so they quit. I've tried to manage without them but a greenhorn can't do the work of half a dozen cowboys. I returned from a day's ride and found the house ransacked and the Chinese cook gone. I found him walking to town. They'd threatened to cut off his queue and the fool heathen had some sort of an idea that he couldn't enter the pearly gates of his celestial heaven without his queue. He was the last one to go. I wanted to give him a lift behind my saddle. He was too badly frightened to accept the leg-up."

"BUT you wouldn't sell out." Poe got the fire started and put water and a double handful of coarsely ground coffee in the pot.

"No. The price McQueen offered was ridiculous. Besides there was the matter of Jim Pickett's murder. I rode to town to hire men and see the sheriff about getting protection. Nobody would hire out to me. The sheriff of Wolf Point, so Big Mike informed me, had gone duck shooting."

"So you got drunk and listened to that little honkatonk gal sing sweet songs. Why don't you pack a gun?"

"I've always been a law-abiding sort of duffer. But I'm afraid I will have to resort to the carrying of firearms. I've the service revolver and carbine I carried while I was a member of the Northwest Mounted. I'm no sort of marksman and the thought of aiming a gun at a man is rather disturbing. That's why I was rather a failure in Canada. I couldn't fall into the proper spirit of the thing. Get one's man and all that sort of rot. I was a bit squiffed when I joined 'em. And there'd been a girl—"

"Do you always talk like this?" Lige Poe was almost grinning. He was slicing bacon and starting breakfast.

"I've tried to pick up your Western vernacular. Jim Pickett finally advised me to give it up." Cowan Campbell's smile was boyish, a little wistful. "Jim Pickett was a great chap," he added.

"Yeah. Got any fresh beef?"

"In the meat cooler."

Lige Poe got a pan and butcher knife and followed the big Englishman outside.

"It was decent of you, old man, to come," Campbell said quietly. "Though she said you would."

Lige Poe stiffened. "What? Who said I'd come?"

"Pina. She said she'd send you and some other chaps. But that she'd have to have the money to lay upon the line. I gave her what I had and rode home as she advised—"

"I didn't see Pina," Poe cut in flatly. "I don't expect to see her again. Neither will you if you gave her enough money to git out of Wyoming. She's just another one of the ladies who—"

Lige Poe had carried his carbine when they started for the meat house. He handed the butcher knife and pan to Cowan Campbell and levered a cartridge into the breech.

"Duck inside!" he ordered. "We got company comin'!"

A lone rider was coming down the trail from the top of the ridge, riding hard. For a moment Poe's gun covered the rider. Then he lowered the gun and eased down the hammer to half-cock.

THE girl Pina pulled her sweat-wet, blowing horse to a halt. She had changed her red dress for a flannel blouse and leather divided skirt and boots. Her heavy black hair was tucked up under the high crown of her hat.

"Saddle your horses and get away from here as fast as you can ride!" Her voice was tense, her face white. Fright darkened her eyes. "They're coming to kill you both!"

"You set a horse like you belonged there," said Lige Poe. "I thought all you knew how to do was to sing *muy dulce* songs to drunks so they'd buy drinks." He turned to Cowan Campbell.

"You got a couple of fresh horses in the barn. You and the little lady fork 'em and keep on ridin' till you reach the town of Buffalo. Did Jim Pickett leave you any money in the bank when he unloaded a half interest in this Pitchfork outfit on you? I hired out to you on my own terms and I don't want to be left holdin' the sack for my bounty money. My services come high but I'll git the job done."

He took a handful of white poker chips from his pocket. His white teeth showed in a wolfish grin.

"Each chip will mark a dead man. That bushwhacker I left on the hill ain't worth more than a hundred dollars. Choctaw's breed scalp will cost you five hundred. A real tough un like Sandy Sanders is worth a thousand dollars dead. Big Mike costs you two thousand. I'll figure out Wade McQueen's bounty after I git 'im. Think your bankroll kin stand that much nickin'? Like as not you'll be gittin' plenty of good range and it'll be well stocked. McQueen's Q outfit is a big un. All told, unless I stop a bullet with my name on it, I'll be costin' you about ten thousand dollars. I'll want it in cash when I meet you at Buffalo."

"I say, old chap, you must be spoofing," protested Campbell. "Pulling a duffer's leg. Nobody does that sort of thing—"

"Here," said Pina, holding a bulky buckskin sack toward Poe, "is five thousand dollars. It's all we have between us. Cowan had a lot more until Jim Pickett sold him this white elephant. We can't get away from here without your help. Here's our money. Take it!"

Her black-gray eyes were hard with the contempt that sounded in the tone of her voice. Still looking at Poe, she spoke to the Laird of Powder River.

"Lige Poe is a killer who sells his guns to the highest bidder. You wouldn't understand even if I knew how to explain it, Cowan. We need this man's help to get out of the country and this is the only way to get it."

Pina tossed the filled buckskin sack at Lige Poe's feet. His face had whitened a little like a man who has been slapped and can't fight back. He grinned mirthlessly and picked up the sack.

"But I'm not running away," said the Laird of Powder River quietly. His blue eyes were as hard and cold as ice and his jaw was jutted stubbornly. "I can't believe that Jim Pickett swindled me. And I've made up my mind to stay here. The Pitchfork Ranch is mine. I rather like it here. I'd be no end of a mucker, you know, Pina, if I were to run away like a coward. A chap has to face his music and all that sort of thing. I'd be ashamed to look anyone in the eye if I turned tail in the face of the enemy. A chap can't lose face, you know. You couldn't marry a rotter, my dear."

Lige Poe was grinning faintly as he looked at the girl. Her face flushed. Poe handed her back the sack of money.

"If you know how to fry steak and spuds and stir up a batch of biscuits, git busy. I'm hungry. I'll put your horse up. When grub's

ready, holler. I'll be up on the ridge yonder. His Nibs had better git his Mounty guns oiled and loaded. Bullets is the only kind of argument McQueen's hired hands savvy."

He lifted Pina from her saddle and set her on her feet beside the big Britisher. Then he led her horse to the barn. A few minutes later he rode back up on the ridge. He had a short-handled shovel slanted over his shoulder.

He rode past a new grave marked with a wooden slab and he read the carved lettering on it without halting.

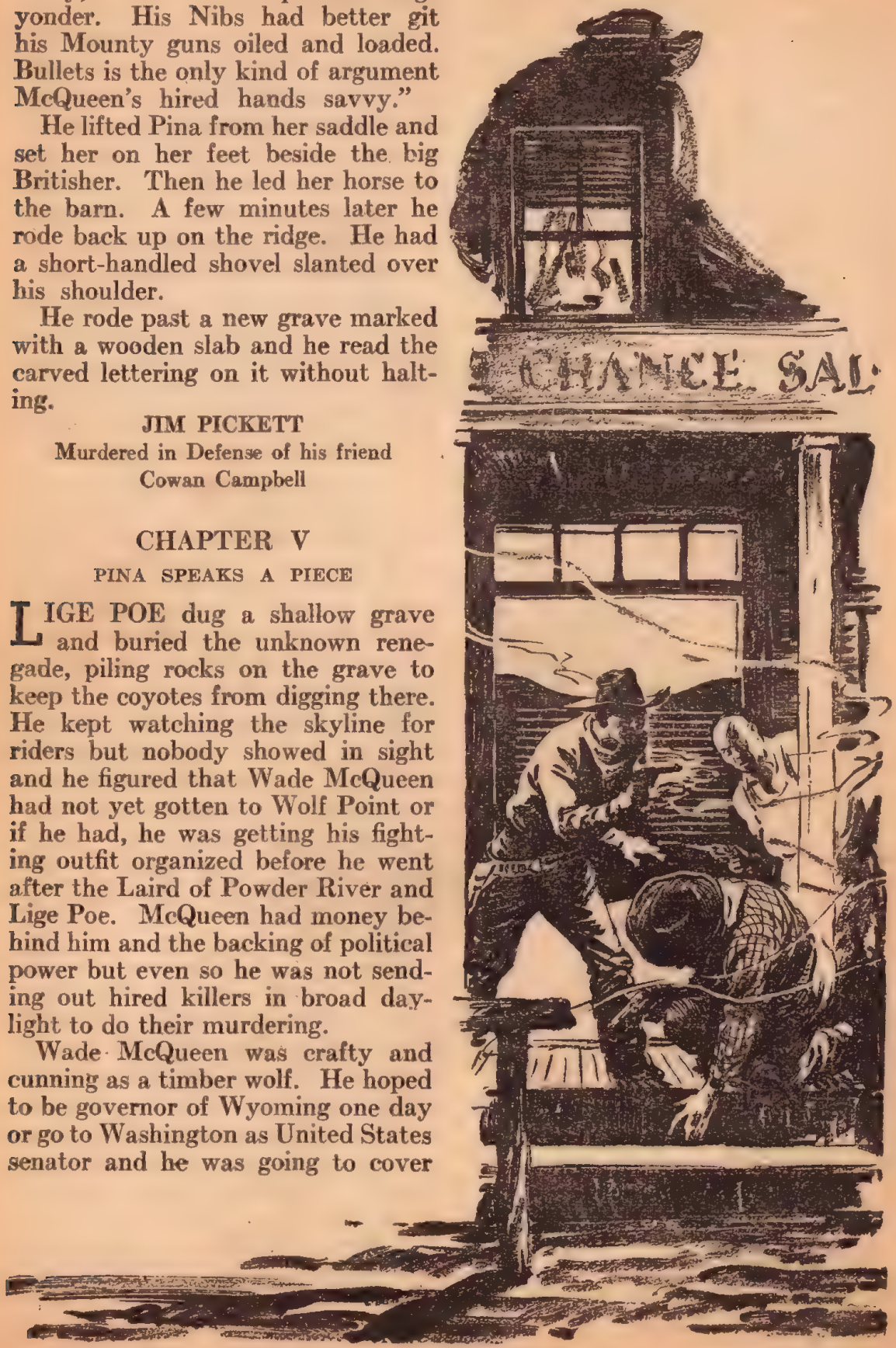
JIM PICKETT
Murdered in Defense of his friend
Cowan Campbell

CHAPTER V

PINA SPEAKS A PIECE

LIGE POE dug a shallow grave and buried the unknown renegade, piling rocks on the grave to keep the coyotes from digging there. He kept watching the skyline for riders but nobody showed in sight and he figured that Wade McQueen had not yet gotten to Wolf Point or if he had, he was getting his fighting outfit organized before he went after the Laird of Powder River and Lige Poe. McQueen had money behind him and the backing of political power but even so he was not sending out hired killers in broad daylight to do their murdering.

Wade McQueen was crafty and cunning as a timber wolf. He hoped to be governor of Wyoming one day or go to Washington as United States senator and he was going to cover



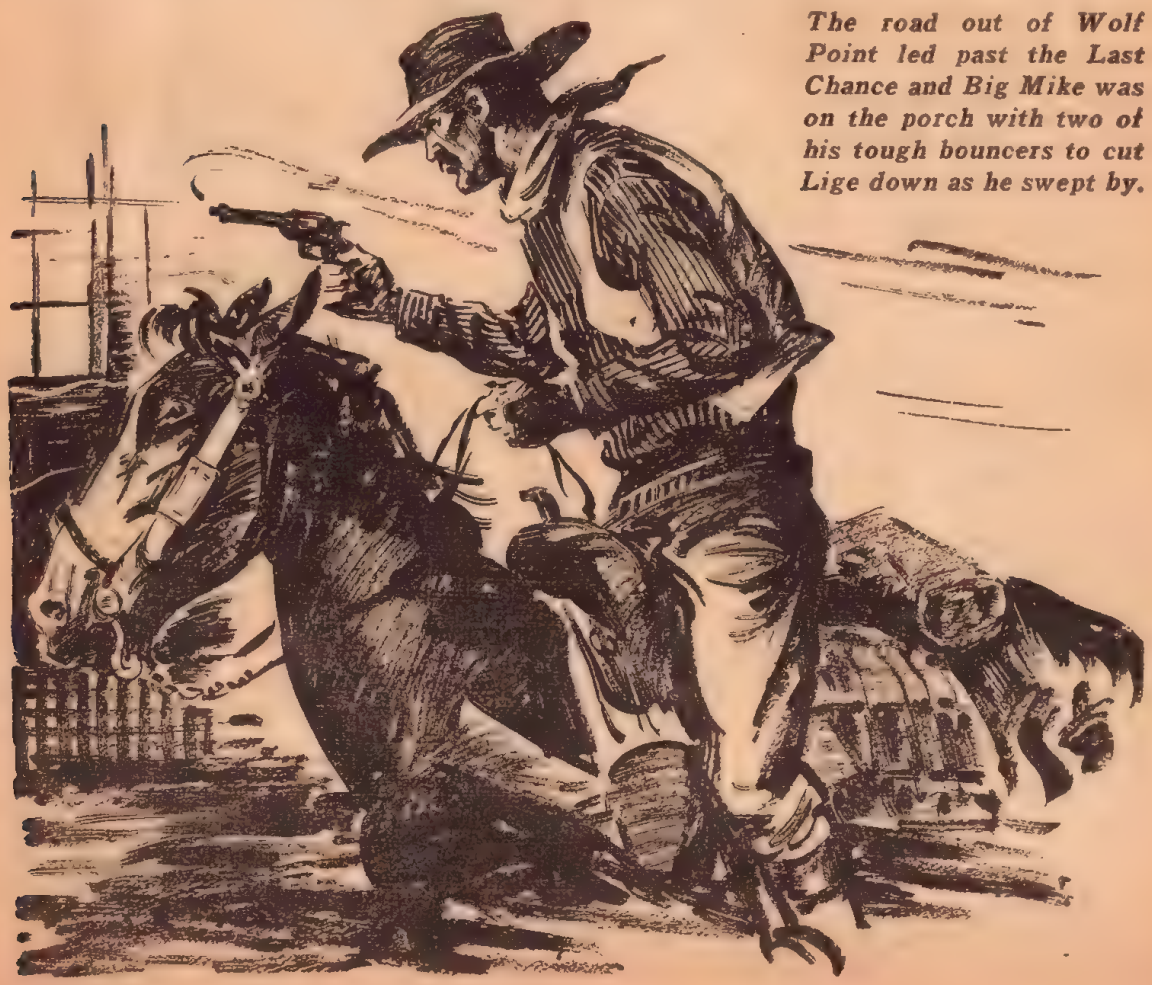
his back trail so that political enemies could not prove anything like murder against him. And the killing of Cowan Campbell might kick up a bad mess at Washington. The Laird of Powder River was an English remittance man, the younger son of some old British family that had a title and a castle somewhere across the ocean. McQueen might kill a hundred such men as Lige Poe and be praised for ridding the country of unwanted and dangerous criminals. But Cowan Campbell had committed no crime. His only mistake, and that was an innocent one, had been buying a half-interest in the Pitchfork Ranch with Jim Pickett. And Jim Pickett's reputation had been none too good. Pickett had gotten the Pitchfork Ranch with six-shooter and saddle gun and had built up his herds with a catch rope and running iron.

Down at the ranch a big bell called Lige Poe to breakfast. He rode down the trail, tossed his shovel on the ground and cared for the Pitchfork horse he had been riding. Then he washed at the creek and carried his carbine in the crook of his arm as he went into the house by way of the kitchen door.

Pina had cooked a breakfast that was gaining the grinning, red-faced approval of the Laird of Powder River.

"Jim Pickett used to like a nip before breakfast, Poe," Campbell said. "I've some decent whiskey—"

"One drink," said Poe, "one drink. Nothin' less than a keg of the stuff



The road out of Wolf Point led past the Last Chance and Big Mike was on the porch with two of his tough bouncers to cut Lige down as he swept by.

would do me any good. I'll work on coffee."

Pina had dusted and done some sweeping and dish washing. The place looked clean and orderly.

"You'd make some man a good wife, lady," Poe remarked.

"We're getting married," explained the Laird of Powder River, beaming, "as soon as this range war is over."

Only two places were set at the table. Campbell made a rather awkward explanation.

"Pina insisted on eating before she called you. She's determined to get the place put in some sort of order."

"No lady ever eats with the hired gunhands, Campbell," Poe said dryly. "But if she wants to be actually useful she'll ride up on the ridge and stand guard. If she sees ary riders comin', she's to ride down here without wastin' time. She'd better take a gun along."

He handed Pina the six-shooter that had belonged to the dead renegade from the Hole in the Wall.

"The last owner of this smoke pole forgot to take it with him," he told her. "If you sight riders, shoot in the air, then git down here fast."

He tossed a bloodstained poker chip on the table. "Keep that for a tally marker, boss. That's a hundred bucks you owe me."

THEN he sat down to eat. Cowan Campbell let his breakfast grow cold as he went to the barn with Pina. Lige Poe wolfed his meat and fried potatoes and biscuits alone and drank several cups of black coffee. He saw the girl ride to the top of the ridge and there was a worried look on the Laird's face when he came back to the house.

"I say, Poe, the situation's a bit awkward. I wish you and Pina could hit it off better. She's set on leaving and is determined I go with her. She insists I give you this money."

Lige Poe looked at the buckskin sack that Campbell put on the table. He undid the string, opened the sack and counted a hundred dollars into his pocket.

"The chip's your receipt, boss. It's not an ordinary poker chip. Hand carved from ivory. I make 'em myself in my spare time. Don't let the little lady worry you. You can't blame a lady like her for not warmin' up to the hired man. She knows her place. I know mine. Some day if you live long enough won't you be one of these earls or dukes or knights or somethin'?"

"I've two older brothers," Campbell explained. "The older is Sir Hubert. There's an old castle and a sort of threadbare title and all that sort of thing. Dick's in the Army in India. Major in the Lancers. Neither of them old and both enjoying excellent health. The chance of my having to return to England is very, very remote. I like it here in the West. Not so much of the redskin Indian atmosphere as I'd expected. War whoops and all that. But the McQueen chap is offering quite a touch of the wild and woolly." He patted the revolver in its polished holster and flap and the white cord looped around his neck and knotted to the pistol butt.

"I'm wearing the Webley. Though it does make me feel a bit foolish."

"You'll feel a lot more foolish without it," Lige Poe smiled faintly, "if there's a ruckus."

FROM up on the ridge came the sound of a shot. Then Pina came down the trail at a lope. Lige Poe met her a little ways from the cabin.

"A bunch of riders coming!" the girl cried. "Fifteen or twenty. What'll we do?"

"You and His Nibs git in the house and stay there. You've got guns and cartridges and it's time you learned to use 'em. Don't come out of that house for anything. It's got log walls and thick doors and heavy shutters on the windows. You'll have water and grub to work on. I'll make my stand at the barn. And while I'm givin' McQueen's renegades a gun argument talk the Laird of Powder River into quittin' the country after the gun smoke clears away. He don't belong here. Sooner or later they'll kill him. And keep that sack of money because you'll need it to buy another new dress. And McQueen will double-cross you on the payoff."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, lady, that I'm onto your game even if His Nibs isn't. McQueen can't run the mule-headed Laird of Powder River off his Pitchfork Ranch so he hires you to work a woman's tricks on the big chump and one of these fine mornin's His Nibs will wake up in Cheyenne or somewhere with a hang-over and you'll be gone and so will his bank roll. And Wade McQueen will own the Pitchfork outfit."

"That's what you think? You're a two-bit killer with a warped brain. You can't recognize decency when you see it—"

"I know a percentage girl when I see one. And Campbell's an easy mark for you and your songs. You work for McQueen. You can't marry His Nibs. He's goin' to be an earl or a duke or somethin' some day. He's got to go back to England when his family calls him back. You'd make a fine duchess even if you did flim-flam the poor chump into marryin' you. You and your Boss McQueen are out to skin the Laird of Powder River and hang his hide on the fence. Now go on to the house. I'll see what kind of a stand I kin make. Mebbeso you're double-crossin' your boss—the way you left me holdin' the sack like a snipe hunter at Santa Fe. Git goin'!"

"If I were a man I'd give you the worst whipping a man ever got," Pina flared. "When this is over I'm going to have Cowan thrash you for everything you just said. I'll—"

"Yonder they come. Git into the house!"

The Laird of Powder River was calling to her too. Pina turned and ran to the log house. Lige Poe rode her horse into the barn and swung the heavy doors shut.

A dozen or more riders sat their horses on the ridge. One of them tied a white silk handkerchief to his carbine barrel and holding it like a flag he came riding slowly down the trail.

Lige Poe climbed to the hayloft and hailed him from the window.

"Stand your hand, Sanders. What's your game?"

CHAPTER VI

WAR TALK

SANDY SANDERS laid his carbine with its white flag of truce across the front of his saddle. He grinned and rolled a cigarette.

"I don't know why you're takin' up this fight like you done, Poe," he began. "The big Britisher ain't heeled with enough money to pay you anything like McQueen is offerin' yuh. You can't side the Laird of Powder River and cut yourself in on the Pitchfork Ranch and hope to hold it because McQueen will hand you what he handed Jim Pickett. And if you're doin' it to make a big

play for the Pina girl you're plain locoed. She's cottoned to His Nibs and she's playin' for high stakes and she's usin' you for a bone-headed sucker."

"Talk turkey, Sanders. What's your proposition?"

"I knowed you'd see sense, Poe. We don't want to hurt that fool Britisher. Let him take his girl and quit the country. You kin write your own ticket with McQueen. He's aimin' to own this section of the cow country and he's makin' you ramrod of the whole smear. Us boys will take your orders. Say the word and we'll rub out Choctaw and his Hole in the Wall outfit just to git the target practice. I told Big Mike last night and I told Wade McQueen this mornin' at Wolf Point that you was the one man we'd foller. You're the one and only man who kin do the job McQueen has cut out for us. You'll have the backin' of the governor hisself and McQueen kin pay you bigger money than me'n you ever saw in one wad. I'm fetchin' you the proposition straight from Wade McQueen hisself."

"And what if I tell you and Big Mike and McQueen to go plumb to hell with your game?"

"In that case, Poe, I got orders to rub you out. And I don't like the job worth a damn."

"Neither do I, Sanders. But that's it. She goes as she lays. And one of these days I'll take my proposition to Wade McQueen. I'll have my hand filled with a gun when I see him. Now take your men and git off the Pitchfork range. When you come back, come a-shootin'. So long, Sanders. You're a square shooter. I'd like to wish you luck. But your good fortune would be my bad luck. And git this straight: Watch Wade McQueen or he'll double-cross you just as shore as you're a white man and he's a snake. Git yonderly. Take your hired hands. I've hired out to the Laird of Powder River. Take a look at what's carved on Jim Pickett's head board. It may be carved on mine some day. But that's more than Wade McQueen will do for you when you stop the bullet with your name on it. Git yonderly, Sanders. My trigger finger is itchin'. Lope on back to Wolf Point and tell Wade McQueen that he ain't got enough money to buy Lige Poe. Adios!"

IT was war talk and Lige Poe knew that he was shouting his own death warrant when he made it. But his challenge rang with sincerity and it held a note of arrogance that wiped the grin from the sunburned face of Sandy Sanders. The towheaded outlaw from Robbers' Roost made a last desperate effort to dicker.

"I got orders to rub you out, Poe. You and the Laird of Powder River. And the orders says to fetch the Pina girl back to Wolf Point because Wade McQueen wants her to sing for him. I'm ramroddin' a fightin' outfit, Poe. We got you outnumbered. We got you licked before you start. You done me a good turn once and I'm tryin' to return the favor. I'll swear to help you git the girl and His Nibs out o' Wyoming. Me 'n' my men will take your orders. McQueen will still pay His Nibs eight thousand dollars cash for his Pitchfork outfit. Use your skull, Poe! I don't want to go through with this!"

"Take a look at that head board, Sanders," Poe said again. "Jim Pickett is buried there. McQueen's hired hands murdered Pickett. I'm killin' the men that done that bushwhackin' and I'm smashin' the big son that hired them to do it. And when I shove a gun in Wade Mc-

Queen's middle and take everything he's got away from him, then pull the trigger, I'll tell him the reason. I told you to git yonderly, Sanders. My patience is tirin'. Hit the trail. Take that white rag and git. And ride hard when you top the ridge because your white flag won't do you no good from then on. When you top the rimrock keep a-ridin' or we start shootin'. Git goin', Sanders! Take my worst regards to Wade McQueen!"

Sandy Sanders rode back up the trail. When he reached the rimrock he yanked the white silk neckerchief from the barrel of his carbine. Standing in his stirrups he took a shot at the loft window of the big log barn. Lige Poe grinned mirthlessly as the .30-30 bullet thudded into the log wall a few inches from his head. He lined his sights and his bleak eyes squinted. His bullet kicked dust into Sanders' face.

Then Poe shifted his position and his carbine cracked again and again and the outlaws from Robbers' Roost returned the gunfire. Rifle slugs thudded into the log walls of the barn. Bullets struck the walls and heavy slab shutters of the log house. And from the house two guns spat jets of flame. Above the rattle of gunfire the voice of the girl Pina shouted to Lige Poe, sharp and shrill:

"You had a chance to save us and you threw it away! And I know why, now! Jim Pickett was your pardner! It was Pickett, not McQueen, who sent for you. You came here to steal the Pitchfork outfit! You and Jim Pickett wanted this layout! You're not Cowan Campbell's friend! You're after the Pitchfork Ranch!"

"It takes a thief," Lige Poe called out, his voice harsh and cold-toned, "to smell out another thief, don't it? Either raise your sights to the five-hundred-yard notch or quit shootin'. You and His Nibs are just wastin' good ammunition!"

LIGE POE wondered if Pina's voice had carried as far as the rimrock ledge. He wondered if Sandy Sanders heard and understood. And he wondered just what affect it would have on the towheaded outlaw from Robbers' Roost. Because he was not sure just what had fetched Sandy Sanders to Wyoming. Whether it was McQueen's money or the same wild and almost impossible idea that Jim Pickett had outlined in a brief note that had come down the outlaw trail by way of blind post offices and the mysterious rustling of the leaves.

Jim Pickett's summons had been cunningly worded. And now it seemed that before the message had reached Lige Poe in the Animas country of New Mexico somebody had gotten wise to Jim Pickett's game and had stopped it by the one and only way that men used when they planned and schemed and fought to gain possession of a huge and productive cattle empire.

A few days ago Lige Poe had reached the Pitchfork Ranch at the forks of Powder River and Crazy Woman. He had expected to meet Jim Pickett there.

Instead he had found the ranch deserted and a wooden slab with Jim Pickett's name carved on it. And so he had ridden on to Wolf Point to learn what there was to be learned.

At various way stations along the outlaw trail Lige Poe had been recognized. Men had dropped thinly veiled hints of the big range war that was about to break out like a prairie fire backed by a heavy wind. But no man had told him that Jim Pickett was dead. Lige had heard the

name of Wade McQueen. He had heard of the stubborn Britisher who called himself the Laird of Powder River. But nowhere had he heard of Jim Pickett's murder. And now Poe began to understand that the men who had given out those bits of half-information were men hired by Wade McQueen.

Jim Pickett had sent no written summons. There had been some sort of penciled note to begin with, but wary men had destroyed that note and the whispering of the leaves along the outlaw trail had altered its wording. McQueen's hired hands had passed on another sort of message. And so Lige Poe had come alone and his every instinct had told him that he was riding into a cleverly baited wolf trap. He had been on

guard. He had seen the half-breed Choctaw and remembered that Choctaw and Jim Pickett had been enemies. He had sighted Sandy Sanders and men from Robbers' Roost in Utah. And he knew that Sanders always played for high stakes. Once he and Sanders had camped together south of the Rio Grande and they had talked of making a big South America stake.

Then Lige Poe had seen Pina and the big Britisher and all his careful plans and calculations and outlaw guesses had been scrambled and thrown aside like a deck of marked cards. He had called for a new pack of cards, new chips in a game he didn't savvy. And he still could not tell himself why he had risked his taw to save the hide of the big Britisher who was calf-eyed over Pina. Pina, who had broken her promise to meet Lige Poe in Santa Fe.

But Poe knew that nobody but the Laird of Powder River could have carved the lettering on the wooden slab that marked the grave of Jim Pickett and something soft away down inside his calloused heart had prompted him to make that fool play.

So he squinted along his carbine sights and pulled the trigger and shot to miss by a close margin because he was not yet ready to kill Sandy Sanders or any of those hired outlaws who came from Robbers' Roost.

The sun was slanting close now to the skyline. Lige Poe told time by the sun and figured that in half an hour it would be getting toward sundown and then twilight. And that if darkness came before he made a surprise move, he and the Laird of Powder River and the girl called Pina would be at the mercy of Sandy Sanders and Sandy's outlaws. Because they could slip down in the darkness and do their killing. Or if Sandy got big-hearted about it he would give Lige Poe and Pina and His Nibs a chance to get away in the darkness. But McQueen was laying cash money on the line in big chunks, and outlaws like Sanders didn't quit a job until it was

finished. Sanders had his orders. He and his outlaws had ridden here to carry out those orders.

An hour, two hours at the most, and the fight would close in. Lige Poe counted the cartridges he had left and his lips thinned to a hard line. He'd better start shooting to kill. Better rub out Sanders the next time he got a fair shot at that tow-headed outlaw who had been showing his head and shoulders now and then in a mighty reckless manner.

Campbell and Pina were no longer shooting because they saw nothing up yonder to shoot at. The hayloft gave Lige Poe an elevation that they did not have at the house. Besides the Britisher and the girl did not savvy anything about this bush-whacker warfare and Lige Poe figured they were holding hands and trusting to luck for their salvation.

Then Sandy Sanders shouted and waved his carbine with the white handkerchief tied to it.

"You still there, Poe?" he yelled down from the ridge.

"Still here, Sanders!"

"I'm takin' your message to Wolf Point. The boys is gettin' dry and hungry and it don't look like the Laird of Powder River is goin' to ask us to supper and a drink. So long. Hang onto your bushy tail!"

"The same to you, Sanders. If you ever decide to sell out McQueen, come back another day. I might buy you off with the Pitchfork calf crop and a jug of His Nibs' best likker."

"Why don't the three of you haul freight, Poe? We're leavin' the get-away wide open. I don't want your fool hide!"

"Don't git chicken-hearted, Sandy! You need the bounty money for that South America stake. You might go into the sheep business in the Argentine!"

LIGE POE let Sandy Sanders ride away. The outlaws from Robbers' Roost followed their leader. They rode away in plain sight and Lige Poe left the barn and headed for the big log house.

He had just reached the house when a bunch of riders showed themselves. They came from the opposite side of the ridge and they rode boldly at a long trot.

The Laird of Powder River jerked open the door and Lige Poe went inside. Pina was cooking supper and Cowan Campbell had a grin on his red face. Neither of them had seen the riders in the distance.

"I say, old man," Campbell said, "Pina's quite convinced me that the wise thing to do is for us to take advantage of our chance to get away. She says we'll get paid for the ranch. Go to Canada. After all, Jim Pickett is dead and I have her to consider. We heard all that the Sanders chap offered. Pina says the thing to do is—"

"Bar the door and shutters," Poe cut in flatly. "It looks like we're about due to make our last stand. Let Pina sing her songs for McQueen. And you kin either side me now or high-tail it and take your runnin' chance. We got company comin' and I'm makin' a stand. Just git out from under foot and give me what cartridges you got left."

Poe slid back one of the shutters. His carbine barrel poked through the narrow opening and he sent a shot over the heads of the men who were riding toward the ranch.

"The next man that rides any fu'ther won't live to ride no more!" he called out. "Stand your hands!"

"Who are you? Where's Cowan Campbell?"

"Don't shoot, Poe! Hold your fire, man!"

The Laird of Powder River jerked open the door and strode outside without a gun in his hand. He held his hands in the air, waving his arms.

Pina pulled Lige Poe back from the window and held his gun barrel down with both hands.

"Don't shoot!" the girl's voice was tense, pleading. They've come. I'd given up hope. But they've come!"

"Who's come?" demanded Poe sharply.

"Cowan's neighbors! Men like Cowan Campbell who stand for decency and law and order! Can't you understand? Won't you understand that there are men in the world who believe in the things you sneer at and shoot at? Those are the men Wade McQueen is trying to run out of Wyoming, Lige, you gun-fighting idiot!"

Pina had thrown herself against him. Her arms were around his neck and her eyes were brimming with tears. Her voice, broken, husky, was in his ears, whispering, begging, pleading, taunting him for what he was and the things he stood for.

And outside in the open the Laird of Powder River was shaking hands with the heavily armed, grim-lipped cowmen who were dismounting. He was calling them by name. Telling them to put up their horses and come to supper.

"There's a chap inside I want you men to know," he was saying. "Only for him I'd have been a goner. Stout chap. Diamond in the rough and all that sort of thing. Heart of gold and the courage of a lion. I say, it's decent of you men to come. In the nick of time, too. And this Lige Poe chap is the salt of the earth. Fights for the underdog and all that sort of thing—"

CHAPTER VII

NIGHT RIDERS' VERDICT

THEY were, Cowan Campbell told Lige Poe, the cattlemen who had banded together for self-protection. They had organized as vigilantes but called themselves the Wyoming Stockmen's Association. Some of them were on the gray side of forty. Others, sons of the older men or ramrods for the different outfits, were of a younger generation. All packed saddle guns and they eyed Lige Poe with hard suspicion as he came from the house at Campbell's insistence.

The Laird of Powder River had, a few days ago, sent out word for them to meet at the Pitchfork Ranch. They had come none too soon, he was telling them with almost boyish excitement.

"We'll organize and bring law to the country!" Campbell declared, waving his arms in wide gestures. His eyes were shining and his face flushed. "Put the fear of law into the ruffians who are coming into the country to terrorize honest citizens.

"I've just had a bit of a sample of their hoodlum nonsense, gentlemen. Only for this stout chap here I'd have been in no end of trouble. Gentlemen and neighbors, shake hands with Lige Poe."

"I reckon," said a large man with a spade beard and cold gray eyes, "that most of us have heard of Lige Poe. Keep him covered, men. If he moves the wrong way, shoot him. Reach high, Poe. We've got you!"

The odds were twenty to one and Lige Poe knew that he hadn't any kind of a fighting chance. He raised his hands slowly to the level of his shoulders. Pina, standing beside him, slid his white-handled six-shooter from its holster and kept it.

"So you play both ends against

the middle," Poe said to her flatly.

"I couldn't stand here and have you make a gunplay and get shot down," Pina's voice was a whisper.

"But I say, men!" The Laird of Powder River was protesting in bewilderment, "You can't do this sort of thing, you know. Poe is my friend—"

"Lige Poe," said the man with the spade beard, "is a curly wolf. He makes these other hired killers look like Sunday-school kids. Stand back, Campbell. We know what we're doin'. Rope 'im, boys!"

Saddle ropes bound Lige Poe's arms to his sides. The older men led Cowan Campbell into the house, talking to him in low tones.

Lige Poe grinned mirthlessly at Pina. The men sent her into the house and led their prisoner to the barn.

A little later the Laird of Powder River had to sit by in helpless, bewildered silence, Pina beside him, gripping his hand in both hers, while the newly arrived men tried Lige Poe for murder.

Some time before daylight a young cowboy on his way to the Pitchfork Ranch with a message for Cowan Campbell had been murdered. The cowboy was Harry Emerson, son of Tom Emerson, the big man with the spade beard. His dead body had been found along the trail to the Pitchfork Ranch. He lay face upward and on his forehead had been found a white poker chip.

"The trade-mark of the killer Lige Poe!" said Tom Emerson. He held the white poker chip in the palm of his hand for the Laird of Powder River and the girl Pina to see.

THERE was a stricken look on the big Britisher's face and in his blue eyes as he looked from the blood-stained poker chip and into Lige Poe's bleak eyes. Pina's face was chalk white.

"I say, Poe," said His Nibs, "you made a ghastly mistake. Young Harry Emerson was hardly more than a boy. He wouldn't have harmed a jack rabbit. You've made a gruesome sort of error, you know! Carried the poker chip thing a bit too far."

"You know about how Lige Poe marks the men he kills?" Tom Emerson eyed the Englishman with hard, cold scrutiny.

The Laird of Powder River took an ivory poker chip from his pocket with reluctant fumbling.

"I gave it to His Nibs," said Lige Poe. "It marked one of the Hole in the Wall gang that I rubbed out. It's ivory. The one you showed us is just an ordinary poker chip. I didn't kill your son, Emerson. I never saw the boy in my life. I don't know who killed him but it's my guess that he met up with Choctaw and his renegades when I ran 'em off the Pitchfork Ranch early this mornin'."

"Can you prove it, Poe?" Tom Emerson's voice was cold, his lips grim, his gray eyes uncompromising.

"I can't prove anything so's you men would believe it."

"We're doin' our own fightin', Poe. We're not hirin' killers like you and Choctaw and Sandy Sanders. The Wyoming Stockmen's Association is wiping this Wyoming cow country clean of such gunslingers as you. We've given you a fairer chance than you gave Harry Emerson. It is the unanimous vote of all men present that you be hanged at sunrise."

Pina hushed Cowan Campbell's bewildered protests and led him out of the barn.

They locked Lige Poe in the sad-

"I'm not running," Campell said. "Get inside!" Lige snapped. "The way that horse is traveling trouble's crowding him hard."

dle room and put a puncher on guard. Then they held a meeting at the house that lasted an hour or more. The big cowpuncher guarding Poe told him that the cattlemen were going to make an attack on McQueen's hired gun fighters who were gathered at the Q Ranch on Powder River.

"Emerson figgers on fetchin' you some company, Poe." the man grinned wolfishly. "Sandy Sanders and Choctaw. The orders is to shoot the common two-bit renegades and hang the leaders. We're pullin' McQueen's fangs and if that son of a snake puts up a holler he'll git shot down. If you know ary prayers, say 'em. It's your last night on earth, mister. You've marked your last man with a poker chip."

"What do you want me to do?" Lige Poe's cold eyes bored through the guard, "beg or whine?"

"You'll weaken when you stretch rope. You'll beg like a yaller dog. You kin pull the wool over the Britisher's eyes, but you ain't foolin' Tom Emerson. You hired out to McQueen. Hell, you even rode Wade McQueen's top horse here. You fell out with Choctaw because he was about to collect the bounty McQueen offered on the Laird of Powder River. Your game here was to make a big play to git in right with Cowan Campbell, then bump him off when the sign was right and mark his dead body with a white poker chip and claim the big bounty Wade McQueen has put on the Britisher's hide. Everybody but His Nibs is onto you. The little lady seen your game from the start."

"You're wiser than a tree full of owls, mister," Poe said. "Tough hand from Bitter Crick and it's your night to howl. Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Tom Emerson's wagon boss and my name is Hank Potter and I've got orders to gut-shoot you if you try to make a break. Which I'm hopin' you will because young Harry Emerson was as fine a young feller as ever forked a cow pony. I'd be proud to empty this six-shooter into your yaller belly."

Hank Potter spat a stream of tobacco juice and Lige Poe had to duck his head to miss it. The big wagon boss sat on an upturned kiack box in the lantern light and glared at his prisoner. He had a key to the padlock on the saddle-room door. When the meeting at the house broke up Hank Potter locked the door again. Lige Poe could hear voices.

The Laird of Powder River was riding with the others to the Q Ranch. He wanted to talk to Lige Poe but Potter told him he wasn't unlocking that saddle-room door for any man, that he was taking his orders from Tom Emerson. After a time Lige Poe heard them ride off into the night.

The cowmen were riding to the Q Ranch to take Sandy Sanders and his men by surprise. Wipe them out and perhaps fetch Sanders back here for hanging if they could capture him alive. Those members of the Wyoming Stockmen's Association meant business. They were striking hard and fast and they meant to give no quarter to any man they had marked on their books as an enemy.

SITTING on the floor of the dark saddle room, Lige Poe worked desperately at the ropes that bound his hands behind his back.

Then he heard voices in the barn. Hank Potter's heavy voice. The throaty sound of Pina's voice. The sound of a cork pulled from a bottle. Soon Poe heard Hank Potter's gruff laugh and Pina singing.

Poe finally worked his arms free. Then he untied the ropes that bound his legs. He listened with his ear against the door. Pina's song broke off in the middle of a stanza.

"Don't! Please don't, Hank! No, no! Don't paw me like that!"

Potter's voice thick with whiskey. He was half-tipsy. There were the sounds of a struggle, then the dull thud of a gun barrel hitting bone and the fall of a heavy body against the door.

In a moment Lige Poe heard the rattle of a padlock and the door was swung open. Pina stood there in the lantern light. Her flannel blouse was torn and her heavy black hair was a tangled mass around her white face. Drops of blood oozed from her bruised mouth. She had Lige Poe's ivory-handled six-shooter gripped in her hand and her dark eyes were bright with excitement. Hank Potter lay in an unconscious heap on the barn floor.

Lige Poe's two hands gripped the girl's shoulders but she pulled away from him.

"Please don't, Lige. Get away from here before they get back! Quick!"

"You're givin' me this chance, Pina," Poe said hoarsely. "But it'll go hard with you when this big gent tells his story to Tom Emerson and the others. They'll make it tough on you. If I go, you go with me. No waitin' again like I did at Santa Fe—"

"Please, Lige!" the girl pleaded. "Can't you understand? It wasn't really love with us. We were both lonesome that night at Tombstone. Both a little desperate and terribly hungry for some kind of affection. But this is different. I do love Cowan Campbell. He can give me everything a girl dreams about. A home. Love. Security. He thinks I'm fine and sweet and he's made me remember that once I had a home and fine things in Virginia until the Yankees killed my father and brothers and the carpetbaggers stole the plantation, and I ran away in the night. I could sing and I managed to get along.

"I did love you, Lige," Pina cried, almost crying now. "I went to Santa Fe. I waited for you. Then I heard that you had gotten into trouble at Tucson and had killed some men and I realized what our life together would be. Always drifting. You with blood on your hands. I couldn't endure it long—"

Hank Potter's eyes blinked open. Lige Poe saw the man jerk his gun. He flung Pina aside and Potter's bullet grazed his shoulder. The ivory-handled gun in Lige Poe's hand spewed fire. Potter lay back like a drunken man going back to sleep. But there was a round hole in his forehead above the bridge of his big nose.

Lige Poe led Pina out of the barn and into the starlight. She was shivering and he held her close in his arms, talking to her in a low whisper.

"I'll have to tie you up at the house, Pina. Make it look right for Emerson. Hank Potter can't talk now. Tell 'em any kind of a story that sounds straight. His Nibs will believe you and that's all that matters. You want to get out of Wyoming. You want Cowan Campbell to get away from here. You've got a little money. I'll sell the Pitchfork Ranch for enough to satisfy the Laird's stubborn pride. McQueen is buyin' the Pitchfork outfit at the Laird of Powder River's own price. You take His Nibs and quit the country before somebody kills you both."

Lige Poe tied Pina up and put

her on the big couch in the front room. She held her lips toward him and he bent and kissed her.

"I don't know when or how we'll meet again, Pina," he said huskily, "but it'll be soon. Take good care of His Nibs. Take him to Canada where there's folks that savvy his language. And good luck, lady. I was wrong. You're aces."

"You quit the country, Lige!"

"Never mind us. We'll get along. Don't try to do anything more for us. They'll kill you if they find you. Promise!"

But Lige Poe did not promise. "My best regards to the Laird of Powder River," was all he said. Again he kissed her and blew out the lamp.

AT the barn Poe saddled the big bay horse that wore Wade McQueen's Q brand. He shoved a saddle gun in the scabbard and took along Hank Potter's six-shooter and cartridge belt. Before he blew out the lantern light he placed a white ivory poker chip on the red-smeared bullet hole in the man's forehead.

Then he swung into the saddle and headed for Wolf Point. He rode hard, his eyes cold and bleak and his mouth pulled in a twisted bitter line. He wanted whiskey. All the whiskey there was in the world to wash away the sweetness of Pina's lips. He hated the Laird of Powder River right now and hoped they wouldn't meet. He didn't want to kill the big Britisher and ruin Pina's chance for happiness. That would spoil one of the few decent gestures he had ever made in his life.

He welcomed the lights of Wolf Point with a sardonic grin. He rode down the street at a swinging walk, with a six-shooter in each hand, his slitted, bleak eyes wary.

Saddled horses lined the hitch rack in front of Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon. Loud voices sounded inside the place. Choctaw's harsh, guttural voice was cursing Big Mike. Lige Poe swung the big bay horse into the black shadows alongside the saloon and waited.

"Fill them sacks with what money you kin git from the till and from the pockets of these tinhorn dealers!" Choctaw was ordering. "Clean 'em down to their last dollar. I'll learn this big son how to treat a half-breed Choctaw Injun. Won't serve me a drink, eh? Set out a bottle of Wade McQueen's best likker, you big potbellied son of a snake!"

"I'll see you in hell first!" Big Mike's whiskey voice was like the roar of a bull. Guns crashed. Through the gunfire men yelled and cursed. Then Choctaw came running out the door with a partly filled gunny sack in his hand. He had three renegades from the Hole in the Wall with him. As they swung aboard their horses Lige Poe rode out into the street, a six-shooter in each hand.

"Drop everything, Injun!" he yelled. "I'm takin' up a collection for my old friend Jim Pickett!"

Choctaw's six-shooter spat flame. His three renegades began shooting. They were all a little drunk and this surprise meeting out here on the street was not helping their aim.

The two guns in Lige Poe's hands were spewing fire. His first bullets knocked Choctaw from the saddle. The half-filled gunny sack dropped in the street. One of the renegades tried to reach from his saddle to pick it up and a bullet from Poe finished him. The other two renegades from the Hole in the Wall spurred off into the night.

Lige Poe reached down and grabbed up the sack of money. Men were shooting at him from the saloon

as he rode around the corner of the building and out of town.

Two men came riding into town from another direction. They avoided the main street and headed for a whitewashed log house at the edge of town. This was Wade McQueen's town home. Wolf Point called the place the White House. McQueen lived in it alone.

Lige Poe reckoned that the short, heavy-set man who rode squatted low in his saddle must be Wade McQueen. The man with him was Sandy Sanders. Their horses were blowing hard and they looked as though they had been riding hard.

"Get two fresh horses, Sandy!" Lige Poe heard McQueen call to his companion. "Fetch 'em here to the house. Don't let anybody but the barn man sight you. Keep away from Big Mike's. Sounds like a free-for-all ruckus going on there, maybe Tom Emerson's cowpunchers shooting up the place. Don't quit me in a tight, Sandy! So help me, I'll make it worth your while. Get me back safe to Buffalo and you can write your own ticket. What a mess! What a break to get! Hurry, man! We're followed. Fetch horses here to the house!"

"Don't lose your nerve, McQueen," Sanders called back across his shoulder as he rode toward the barn leading McQueen's horse.

Poe sat his horse back in the darkness and watched Sanders ride on to the barn. Then he rode up to the rear of Wade McQueen's White House and, leaving the gunny sack with its money tied to his saddle, he walked around front.

A light burned in the front room and the front door stood ajar. Lige Poe stood in the doorway, a gun in his hand, and watched Wade McQueen squat on his boot heels in front of a big steel safe.

CHAPTER VIII

SIX-SHOOTER SALE.

WADE McQUEEN swung the heavy door of the safe open. He took sheafs of bank notes and small canvas sacks of gold money from the safe and stuffed them into two leather saddlebags. He was breathing hard and working with feverish haste. A lighted lamp was on the floor beside him and next to the lamp lay a pearl-handled, silver-mounted six-shooter.

Lige Poe stood in the doorway, studying the man. Wade McQueen was short, bull-necked, with graying black hair and dyed mustache curled at the ends. He wore a canvas hunting coat with big-game pockets and canvas pants shoved into the tops of his high-heeled boots. His black hat was pulled down hard on his head and he looked like some town dude about to go on a hunting trip. McQueen was a city man and his manner of wearing his clothes showed it. He was chewing on an unlit black cigar that still had its red-and-gold band. His neck and thick jaws were clean-shaven and red as new brick. A huge diamond glittered on the middle finger of his left hand. Gambler, mining man, promoter, politician, he was said to be the most ruthless man in Wyoming. What he wanted he took. When men got in his way Wade McQueen had them removed and paid the damages to his henchmen who were gun-toters like Sanders.

Poe guessed that Tom Emerson and his men had sprung a big surprise on Wade McQueen, Sandy Sanders and Sandy's renegades from Brown's Park and Robbers' Roost. McQueen had gotten away. No doubt Sanders had acted as McQueen's bodyguard and shot a way through for them. Sandy's outlaws

"You can't buy me, McQueen," Lige said. "I take what I want."

"You'll never get away with it," McQueen warned. "You're a smart wolf, but there's traps for the smartest."

needed no orders. They knew how to fight and when to scatter and run and those who got away would again meet at some prearranged place along the Outlaw Trail.

"Don't claw for that purty gun or I'll bust your spine with a hunk of lead, McQueen," Poe warned flatly. "Don't knock over the lamp on purpose or accidental or I'll fill your back full of lead. Just stand up slow with those two saddlebags. And buckle 'em down. I don't want to spill any of my plunder. Don't git rattled or I'll git spooked and shoot!"

Wade McQueen turned on his boot heels. Sweat beaded his face but he wasn't scared. Or if he was scared he hid it well behind a faint grin and a pair of yellow eyes. When he grinned he showed a double row of gold teeth. The chewed black cigar slid to the other side of his mouth.

"Don't let your trigger finger itch, Poe," he said calmly. "Killing me won't buy you anything but a walk up the gallows steps. It's about time you came around. Put away your gun and quit acting the fool. You can't bluff Wade McQueen. Even if I was fool enough to let you rob me you'd never get away with it. You're too smart a wolf to get trapped like that, Lige Poe. I've sure had a run of tough luck tonight. Choctaw killed young Harry Emerson and we got jumped on by a bunch of night-riding ranchers. Sanders stuck by me. You'll string your bets with me unless you're crazy."

"Then call me crazy, McQueen. Because you can't buy me. You take what you want. So do I. But the difference between you an' me is this, McQueen: I do my own killin'. I don't hire any man to do my dirty work. I'll dicker with you on my own terms or I'll give you a chance to fill your hand with that fancy gun. Make your choice and make it quick. If I'm crowded by Sanders I'll kill you both. I'm bankin' this game. I'm dealing my own hand and it's pat. All you've got is deuces tonight, McQueen. Your luck's run out. You haven't got enough money to buy me. And when I git this job done I'd just as soon die a-fightin' your gun-toters or the troops that your governor will set on my trail. But I'll never hang, mister. It ain't in the cards."

"What's your game, Poe?" Wade McQueen's yellow eyes blazed coldly and his grin was forced.

"How much money in them two saddlebags?"

"Better than a hundred thousand dollars."

"And there's a thousand mebbe in the gunny sack from Big Mike's. That'll do. You'll find a bill of sale to the Pitchfork outfit in the mail if you live long enough. Now who killed Jim Pickett?"

"Choctaw. Sanders told me you and Jim Pickett used to trail together. I'm sorry Choctaw made that mistake. Pickett got cocky but I didn't want that blasted half-breed to kill him. I could have used Pickett and you when you got here even if Pickett did have some fool notion of bucking my game. The Britisher got stubborn and Pickett took his part. He should have known better. I told Choctaw to bring Pickett to town but the breed got drunk and killed him instead. If you want Choctaw punished—"

"I've taken care of Choctaw," Lige Poe said dryly. "You just bought the Pitchfork outfit, mister, lock, stock and barrel. The Laird of Powder River is quittin' the country. You and Emerson and the others kin fight 'er out. Put them two saddlebags on the table and back away

from 'em. Pronto, McQueen!"

"Fifty thousand is a big price for the Pitchfork outfit, Poe."

"I'm namin' the price, McQueen. Whenever you don't like it, make a play for that fancy gun you're wearin. Lay that dough on the line!"

Wade McQueen put the two filled saddlebags on the table. He heard the sound of hoofs outside and tried to cover it by beginning to talk in a loud tone.

"Quit runnin' off at the head!" Lige Poe shut him up. "I know that's Sanders a'comin'. I'm givin' Sandy his chance to buy chips in the game."

POE picked up the two saddlebags and flung them across his left shoulder. Then he backed out the door with his gun in his hand just as Sandy Sanders swung off his horse out at the front gate.

"Keep your gun hand empty, Sandy!" Poe called. "Your boss just lost his taw. It ain't his lucky night. Come in with your hands up. Mebbeso you want to save McQueen's hide. That'll be up to you. Emerson will hang him if they ketch him here. Hang you to boot. To say nothin' about my own neck. Me 'n' you kin save Wade McQueen if you want to bother with him. Otherwise we kin leave him here and ride yonderly. I got the money he kep' in his safe."

"You're the damndest fool for luck, Poe!" Sanders exploded. "You ain't trickin' me?"

"Not if you kin keep your hands empty. By rights Wade McQueen should buy a drink."

"You win, Poe." McQueen stood with the lamp in his hand. There was a twisted grin on his square, heavy face. The look in his yellow eyes could have meant either admiration or hatred for Lige Poe. "Come in, Sandy. I'll buy you both all the champagne in Buffalo if you two renegades can get me there alive. Not that I'm afraid to hang, you understand, Poe—"

"Not that any of us are scared of hangin'," said Lige Poe flatly, "but if we don't hang together, as somebody in history said once, we'll all hang separately. You comin' in friendly, Sanders?"

"Friendly as a sheep dog, Poe."

Lige Poe was the only one of the three who had a gun in his hand. He told Wade McQueen to pick up his six-shooter and shove it in its holster.

"I'll make you two gents a proposition," Poe said. "It's this: That we'll pick up a pair of friends of mine on our way to Buffalo. Sanders and me will ride rear guard and escort. McQueen kin come back next week or next year and finish his fight for the Powder River cow country and mebbeso if I'm broke and restless, I'll hire out to him.

"But tonight and from here on out of this part of Wyoming I'm workin' for the Laird of Powder River. For His Nibs and his bride-to-be. And I'll kill either one of you that feels like takin' it up."

"Don't cross the Texican, boss," advised Sandy Sanders, grinning. "And let's don't waste no more time. I got a bullet hole in my shoulder and I kin hear the comin' of men that don't like me. Whatever Lige Poe tells you is the straight goods, McQueen. If he says it's a horse on you and the drinks is on the house he ain't lyin'. I'd rather have Lige Poe sidin' me than to have the rest of Wyoming at my back. Call it quittin' if you like, boss, but I'm stringin' along with Poe."

"Call it a deal," said McQueen. "Who are these friends of yours we pick up on our flight yonderly, Poe?"

"We're pickin' up the Laird of Powder River and Pina from Carolina." Lige Poe grinned faintly. "Fetch a bottle, McQueen. Fetch several bottles. And plenty of ammunition. But we don't do our drinkin' till we've kicked plenty of dust and distance in the eyes of Tom Emerson and the Wyoming Stockmen's Association. Business before pleasure. Them hombres had a rope around my neck once tonight and I didn't like the feel of it."

Poe kept his gun in his hand. His voice was flat-toned and his bleak eyes searched the face of Wade McQueen.

"You're a gambler, McQueen. Give me your word as such that you'll play the game square if I git you through alive?"

"My word as a gambler," said McQueen. "I never broke it, Lige Poe. Whatever your game is, I'll play along."

"And you, Sandy?"

"I'm with you all the way, Lige. I told the boss early tonight that I'd quit before I went after you again. You saved my life once. You done forgot but I haven't."

"Then let's git goin'."

Lige Poe motioned toward the front door with his gun. Sandy Sanders led the way out. McQueen, picking up a couple of bottles of whiskey from the well stocked sideboard, followed. Lige Poe carried the filled saddlebags. He blew out the lamp and shut the door behind them.

"Where's your horse, Lige?" asked Sandy Sanders.

"Out back. I'm ridin' McQueen's big bay like I owned 'im."

Sanders grinned. "Whichaway?"

"The Pitchfork Ranch. Break trail, cowhand. If you bust open an ambush it's your hard luck. *Andale!* Let's go!"

CHAPTER IX

END OF A GUN-SMOKED TRAIL

LIGE POE told Sanders to ride straight down the main street and stop at Big Mike's Last Chance Saloon. "Just to blow the lights out and count the change," he explained.

There was enough moonlight to identify the dead body of Choctaw. Poe tossed a white chip into the dead half-breed's face. His bleak eyes looked at Wade McQueen and his teeth bared in a wolfish grin.

"Choctaw is worth five hundred of any man's money. I killed some of them Hole in the Wall renegades but the job was free. Take a look inside, gents."

Big Mike was dead. Sandy Sanders grinned at Lige Poe.

"The joint's sure cleaned out," he remarked. "But somebody is payin' me a thousand dollars that was in Big Mike's till. And the thousand he owes me. I bet Big Mike that Lige Poe was throwin' in with the Laird of Powder River."

"I got your thousand in this gunny sack, Sandy," said Poe. "But I ain't so certain you won your bet. It looks like I'm ridin' close herd on Wade McQueen all the way to Buffalo."

"But you're hired out to the Laird of Powder River," argued Sandy Sanders as they rode on out of town.

"Supposing you leave the bet to me," McQueen said dryly. "Neither of you is losing a thin dime so far. Let's keep riding. It's worth six-bits to me to get there alive and I never welshed a bet in my life."

They left Wolf Point behind them. Dimmed lights and furtive eyes watched them from the shadows. The town was hiding behind cover. Awed voices whispered the dread names of Wade McQueen and Lige

Poe and Sandy Sanders but no gun flame broke the black shadows because no man left in Wolf Point had the temerity to shoot at the three who rode away.

"Good place to build a cow town some day, McQueen," remarked Lige Poe.

McQueen chuckled and pulled the cork on a quart bottle. Sanders drank with him. Lige Poe shook his head when McQueen offered him the bottle.

"Not till the job's done," he explained.

It was nearing daylight when they reached the Pitchfork Ranch. The Laird of Powder River had on his corduroy coat and his Mounty breeches and boots and hat. His carbine covered the three as they rode up. Pina was back in the shadows, a gun in her hand.

"Save your lead," said Poe. "We're leavin' Wyoming. Rattle your hocks, Campbell! Git 'im goin', Pina! The Laird of Powder River just sold the Pitchfork Ranch to Wade McQueen. I've got the money. Make out a bill of sale and have His Nibs sign it. Then he gits a hundred thousand dollars and it's your job, Pina, to pack it. And tell the big ox not to ask questions. He's spoke out of turn so many times that the cow country has one stock answer to everything he ever asked."

"And what's the answer?" Pina's voice was taut.

"It's 'Quien sabe?' "

"I say, Pina," Campbell complained, "the chap's slipped a cog. He's talking a lot of nonsense. What's he getting at? I find you tied up and the Hank Potter chap dead with a poker chip on his head and you say I owe Lige Poe a spot of whiskey. And then he shows up with McQueen and spouts a lot of plain gibberish about a bill of sale for the ranch. I was about to pull stakes anyhow. And the price was fifty thousand and that's more than the outfit's worth. I've had a rather nasty quarrel with Emerson on your account, Poe, old man. I'm afraid I'm between the devil and the deep

sea. I told Emerson I wouldn't allow them to hang you—"

"And he knocked Tom Emerson's ears down," put in Pina. "Cowan wants to know what it's all about."

"Tell His Nibs," said Lige Poe, "that the answer is still 'Quien sabe?' "

"Who knows?" Pina translated it for the Laird of Powder River.

"Now make out the bill of sale and take these." Lige Poe handed her the saddlebags. "And we ain't got the rest of the week to lose gittin' yonderly."

NO stranger cavalcade ever crossed the Wyoming cow country. Wade McQueen and Lige Poe riding in the lead. The Laird of Powder River and the girl called Pina from Carolina, with their horses so close together their stirrups touched. Holding hands. Sandy Sanders bringing up the rear.

Dawn broke and shadowy riders

fell in with Sandy Sanders. The Hole in the Wall was a short ride for tough men forking stout horses, and there was no longer the half-breed Choctaw to dispute their right of way.

"Some day," said Wade McQueen, and his voice was that of a man who dreams of vast empires, "this whole country will be mine, Poe. I'd like to have you run it for me. Hire Sanders for straw boss. The biggest cow outfit in the West. I'll cut you both in on the calf crops and beef shipments. Look at it, man, spread out on all sides as far as a man can see. The governor will hand you and Sanders a blanket pardon that covers your back trail. Want it?"

"The purtiest cow country a man ever sighted," said Lige Poe. "But the grass that grows on murdered men's graves never fattened cattle. If I could make peace between you and men like Tom Emerson—"

"I'll let you write your own ticket, Poe."

Lige Poe took some ivory poker chips from his pocket and counted them over to McQueen.

"Keep 'em for souvenirs, McQueen. After all, they're just white chips. I'll ramrod your outfit and all I'm worth is regular wages. Sandy Sanders will straw-boss the spread. Give us and the boys with Sandy a clean slate and that's all we'll ever ask for. Wages and the right to ride the range like free men. We'll treat Emerson and the other cowmen right and when they send reps to the Q wagon those reps won't have to stay awake twenty-four hours to make sure we ain't stealin' their cattle. They'll all git a cowhand's break and that's all that a real hand ever asked for. Hire us like that, McQueen and we'll be proud to work for you. I'm worth a hundred a month and Sanders will be satisfied with seventy-five. The other boys git forty a month and like it."

Lige Poe took the gunny sack that held the robbery money from Big Mike's Last Chance. He handed it to McQueen.

"Toss that on the bar and let Sandy and his boys scramble for it. It's town money for 'em. They'll blow it before daylight the next mornin', and from then on they'll make good cowhands."

McQueen nodded and dropped the sack of money across his saddlehorn. His yellow eyes searched the bleak eyes of Lige Poe for a reason for all this. They found no answer. Not until Lige Poe rolled and lit a cigarette and looked out across the Wyoming cow country into a sunrise that was painted with the colors that belong to a cowhand's songs and humble prayers.

"We can't buy that, McQueen," Poe said. "We can't steal it. It's too big for men like you and me to handle. The Big Feller in the sky up yonder made it and he gives it to the men that kin handle the job."

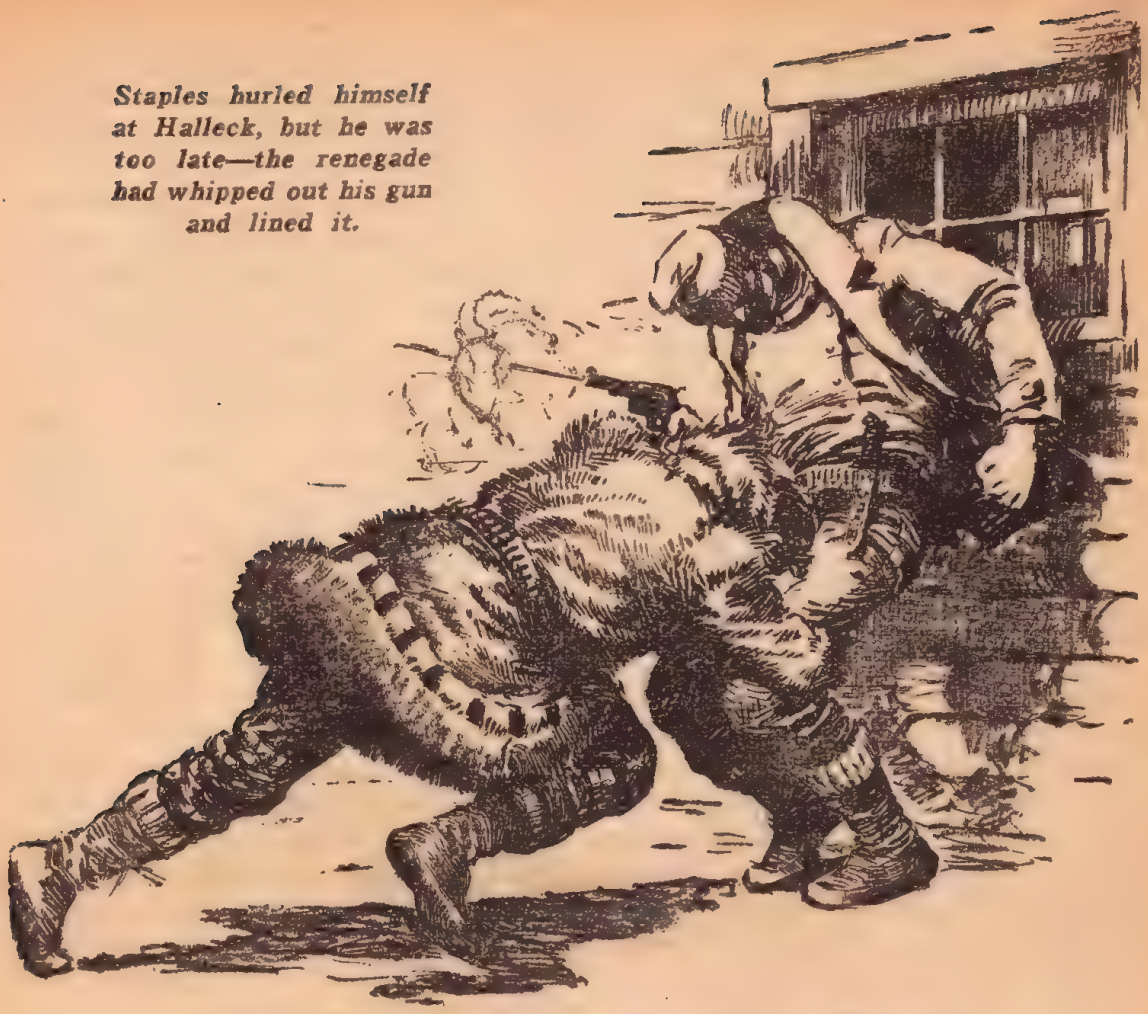
Then Wade McQueen understood. Yellow, hard eyes and bleak, gray eyes met and their glances softened. McQueen held out his hand.

"I give up an empire. You give up the woman you love. It's a sunrise, Lige Poe."

"A sunrise, mister. It belongs to every man that's got the eyes to see it."

"To every woman," whispered the girl Pina who caught the words with the breeze from a crimson dawn. "Thank you, Lige Poe. And may God bless you and give you all that I promised you when we watched another sunrise a thousand years ago."

THE END.



Staples hurled himself at Halleck, but he was too late—the renegade had whipped out his gun and lined it.

BREAK-UP BONANZA

BY KENNETH GILBERT

Bill Staples stared at Square-deal Simpson, fur buyer at Seven Up, in growing wrath. "You mean to tell me," demanded Staples, "that you'll only pay five hundred dollars for a thousand dollars' worth of prime marten and fox pelts?"

Square-deal shrugged and evaded the other's eyes. "Have to handle my fur through Bart Slade," he explained. "He sort of runs things in this camp. I can't ship fur outside without lettin' him handle it—and he takes a bigger profit than I do. Makes it tough on trappers, but I reckon it can't be helped!"

"Slade?" echoed Staples. "Why, I remember that crook. Once rooked me out of the slickest piece of placer ground I ever owned. Got me drunk and cold-decked me with four kings while he took four aces. A year later a feller told me he'd watched Slade switch decks on me. I've been lookin' for him ever since!"

Square-deal looked nervous, and dropped his voice cautiously. "I'm your friend, Bill," he declared. "Don't start anything with Slade in Seven Up! He came here with his gang last fall and took over. Just about runs everything. Owns all

the gamblin' games and the only saloon in camp. Figures on makin' a big clean-up on these chechahcos and stampeders goin' into the Willow Flat country this spring.

"Why, he's even got an ice pool started with fifty to sixty thousand dollars goin' to the man who can guess nearest the time that the ice in the Big Beaver will go out! Like they do each spring down on the Tanana. Everybody in camp has taken at least one share in the pool, at a hundred dollars a throw!"

"Never heard of an ice pool bein' crooked," declared Staples, "but if Bart Slade is promotin' it, there's somethin' wrong!"

The fur buyer shook his head. "Don't you go makin' that crack around camp," he warned. "Bart Slade is slick as a young beaver pelt. He's been keepin' the boys good-natured with plenty of free drinks, and they're willin' to swear by him. If you start after him with your hackles up, either his gang or the stampeders will likely make wolf bait of you. Better stick your nose between your paws and keep quiet! You'll take five hundred for that fur?"

Bill Staples shook his head. "I need a thousand to grubstake me the comin' summer," he explained. "Got to have it. Five hundred won't do. Last winter I hit a vein of quartz that looks as though it'll assay two hundred dollars a ton, and some samples are so rich that you can pry out the gold with a knife point. Trouble is, that mine is a long way back in the hills. Needs a mill and flotation outfit. That's why she's no good as a mine right now. But with a grubstake I can get out a pile of ore and maybe interest somebody in backin' me. Need twenty-five thousand dollars to buy a mill in the States and get it back where the mine is. But that twenty-five thousand will likely produce a million! You know anybody who'd take a flyer with me?"

"Take it myself, if I had the money," replied Simpson promptly. "But, there's nobody in camp—Wait, now! There *will* be somebody flush enough to back you! *The feller who wins the ice pool!*"

Staples' eyes lighted for a moment, then he groaned and made a wry face. "I'll name the winner right now!" he declared. "It'll be Bart Slade! You think I'd have *him* for a pardner?"

"Bill," retorted Simpson, "I'm warnin' you! No matter what you think about Bart Slade, you'd better sing low in this camp. If you're smart, you'll take what you can get for your fur and mush back into the hills. These Seven Up stampeders won't stand for you sayin' that their ice pool is crooked. You're an outsider; *you* don't even own a share of the ice pool! You can't even prove that it's crooked!"

Bill Staples eyed him moodily. Discovery that Bart Slade was in Seven Up revived thoughts of that poker game which had ended so disastrously. The account had to be squared—but how? There was a lot of sense in what Simpson said about keeping quiet. After all, Staples was an outsider. But the very fact that Slade was promoting an ice pool involving a fortune seemed to Staples to be proof in itself that something was wrong.

"A polecat doesn't change his stripes," he reflected. "Slade doesn't aim to let that money get away from him." Yet an ice pool was not the kind of gambling game which could be manipulated unfairly; never had Bill Staples heard a word of suspicion raised against the famous ice pool of the Tanana. It was an hon-

est institution of the North of which Alaskans were proud.

This new ice pool on the Big Beaver might be just as honest, but all Bill Staples' instincts told him that it was going to be a steal—for Bart Slade. If Slade and his gang had taken over Seven Up, if he owned the gambling games and the only saloon; if he even levied a tribute on a fur buyer like Square-deal Simpson, then the Big Beaver ice pool was as crooked as a dog's hind leg!

If Slade robbed these stampeders, then it might be a long while before Bill Staples could get backing for his mine, for the chechahcos would be suspicious of any proposition thereafter. When he got a stamp mill going on his property, he'd be rich. Meanwhile, he had five hundred dollars, hardly enough to grubstake himself through the summer. Did he dare risk that money? If he failed, or if his hunch turned out to be wrong after all, not only would there be lean months ahead of him during which he'd have to go to work for somebody else, but he might even lose his mine because he wouldn't have time to do the necessary assessment work. Yet the love of a gamble was strong in his prospector's soul.

"I'll take that price you offered for my fur," he told Simpson shortly.

The latter looked relieved. "Now you're talkin'!" he approved. "Suppose you'll be hittin' back into the hills?"

"Sure," agreed Staples. "But there's no hurry. I aim to look things over here for a spell."

"You keep away from Bart Slade!" warned the fur buyer as he counted out the money.

Staples merely grinned. "Why," he protested, "I was figurin' to look him up and buy a share of his ice pool myself! It *might* be on the square—and I might be lucky enough to pull down that jackpot!" Then he went out into the night before Square-deal Simpson could reply.

SNOW had virtually gone from the hills and under the April moon the ice of the Big Beaver looked ominously black, as though the river were ready to break its wintry shackles at any moment. But Bill Staples knew the Big Beaver well. Never, as far as he could remember, had the ice gone out before May 1st. That meant it would remain for at least another week. Well, it was a piece of information which might prove valuable in case he decided to buy into Bart Slade's ice pool. He went down the river bank, where the stream curved around the huddle of cabins which was Seven Up's center of population.

The moonlight lay strongly on the river and he made out a stake driven into the ice perhaps a hundred yards from shore. Secured to this stake was what appeared to be a wire, which disappeared into a small cabin on the river bank. Bill Staples nodded understandingly. Probably the wire was fastened to a clock inside the shack, and when the ice started to move it would pull on the wire and stop the timepiece, so that the exact minute when the break-up occurred would be determined. And the man who had guessed that exact time, or who was nearest to it, would be the winner of the ice pool.

Simple enough and regular, he decided. "Looks as if there's nothin' crooked about *that*," he decided. But to satisfy his curiosity he went closer to the shack, determined to see if all was well. Just as he came up, a shadow detached itself from

the side of the building—a man with a six-gun dangling from his right fingers approached.

"What you want?" demanded the guard.

Staples took a look at him and decided that this was probably one

of Bart Slade's henchmen. He didn't like the man's tone, and under other circumstances he might have replied in kind to the challenge, but he was following Square-deal Simpson's advice and singing low.

"Aim to buy a share in the pool," he answered. "Just wanted to see how you had things rigged to decide the time when the ice goes out. Mind if I take a look?"

Staples' words were mild enough, and maybe the guard had been asked the question before. Yet he grunted and eyed Staples suspiciously a moment before opening the door of the cabin and striking a match. Just as Staples had supposed, there was a clock fastened to the end of the wire, a clock ticking away loudly. It would stop when the ice started to move. He nodded.

"Smart idea," he approved. "Well, that satisfies me!"

The guard closed the door and Staples went on. Yet he was *not* satisfied! Bart Slade had some trick up his sleeve; he was sure of that. Staples took another long look at the ice. It was honeycombed from the action of sunlight and the ceaseless cutting of the current beneath it. There was a chinook wind blowing in from the coast, a wind which stroked his cheeks with balmy warmth. The ice might go out earlier than usual!

But as far as he could see it would last a week longer, anyway. Still, much would depend not only on the mildness of the spring weather but the conditions downriver. The stream swept in a bend around Seven Up, and Bill Staples figured he'd have a look below the curve. Ice would start breaking away down there first, and then the mass upstream would move when the lower channel was fairly clear. As he went on in the moonlight he thought that he saw a figure keeping pace with him among the cabins of the camp itself. But he could see no reason for being followed, and he paid no further attention. As he rounded the bend which shut the camp off from view, he saw a dark object beside the frozen river.

It was a crazily built shack on stilts at the edge of the river, and a row of braced piling ran out into the channel. He remembered, then, that Indian Charley, an old breed who made his living catching salmon and drying them for dog food, had a fish trap here. The place looked dark and deserted. In fact, when the ice went out it would be a miracle if shack and fish trap were

not carried along with it. But maybe Indian Charley had foreseen that possibility and had driven his fish trap solidly into the bed of the river.

In that case, Staples reasoned, it would probably serve as an obstruction which would delay the break-up. Still, that wasn't important; the stampeders who had bet on the ice pool probably had taken the fact into consideration. But as Staples stood eying the structure, he heard the rattle of loose gravel somewhere behind him.

Intuitively he reacted, swinging around abruptly, hand on the six-gun which was holstered under his parka. He saw a man moving into the shadow of a clump of trees some fifty yards away. "If that's the same gent I saw up there among the cabins," Staples muttered, "he's watchin' *me!* But why?" All at once Bill Staples' hunting instincts were aroused, as though deep in the wilds he had suddenly discovered a grizzly attempting to stalk him.

He was likewise suspicious. "Bart Slade doesn't know I'm in town," he argued to himself. "Anyway, he wouldn't likely recognize me behind these whiskers. Simpson might have passed the word—but no! Old Square-deal was always a good friend!"

It occurred to him just then that he had attracted attention to himself by that visit to the guarded cabin upstream where the clock-controlled wire and stake in the river ice were located. Maybe the guard had sent somebody to watch him. But why? The only answer to that seemed to confirm his first conclusions—that the ice pool was crooked. "In which case," he decided, "I'll be smart if I keep my eyes peeled. No man's life is important to Bart Slade if there's a wad of money this size involved!"

Yet the shack drew his curiosity. He thought he'd take a closer look at the fish trap to see how strong it was and if it really would retard the break-up for any length of time. He went toward it, convinced that the man who had stepped behind the trees was still watching him. Suddenly Staples' hand tightened on the butt of the six-gun!

There was a light inside the shack! This might mean only that Indian Charley was there and if that were true, he had nothing to worry about. He had known the old breed for a long while. Charley, in fact, might have some sound ideas about when the Big Beaver would awaken and throw off its icy bonds. As Staples stepped onto the platform outside the shack, a loose board creaked.

At once there was movement inside the place, and a low voice asked, "That you, Pete?" Bill Staples knew it wasn't Indian Charley's voice; it sounded like that of a white man. Suddenly he had the feeling that he might be in a ticklish spot. There was a man watching him from behind the trees, and there was another inside the shack. And, according to Square-deal Simpson, *there was a matter of more than fifty thousand dollars involved!* Staples was a stranger and his nosy prying around at night would be regarded with suspicion, to say the least. The stampeders might think he was trying to put over some skullduggery of his own concerning the ice pool. There seemed only one thing to do and that was to bluff his way out of the situation.

He mumbled something purposely unintelligible so that the man who had challenged him could not read his voice clearly, and the door

opened. Framed against the light from a candle which rested on a table in the center of the room was a bearded man whom Staples had never seen before. Possibly a stampeder, Staples thought, but more likely one of Bart Slade's crowd. Before the man could move or close the door, Staples stepped inside.

The man's right hand went to a gun swinging on his hip, but Staples' own gun was trained on the other's middle and the man let his hand fall. "Easy!" Staples warned. "I got a jerky trigger finger. Better put your hands on that table until we get things straightened out! And don't make a sound or you'll likely spoil everything! There's somebody watchin' outside!"

The man obeyed, and looked at him in puzzlement. "Bart send you?" he asked cautiously. "If so, why the gun? Never saw you before!"

"Just a newcomer," retorted Staples easily, "but I savvy the hang of things! Bart knows me well. Just keep quiet until that gent outside goes away. We might have to fool him a bit, pard! Bart will likely be pleased. Can't explain things right now!"

"Who is he?" demanded the other in a whisper, but Bill Staples shook his head. No sense in talking too much. He kept his gun handy.

As they waited in the silence that came over the place, Bill heard a muffled ticking. He looked around, expecting to see a clock, but there was none in sight. The sound seemed to come from the floor, but Staples could see nothing there. Yet as he looked down curiously he saw something else which stirred his curiosity. Short pieces of what looked like grayish cord. There was an opened jackknife on the table, too, as though the man he had surprised had been busy at some task when he arrived. On the floor and on the table were paper wrappings, or what appeared to be wrappings, for they still held a half-rolled shape. They looked slightly greasy, too. Staples stared hard at them, a tingly feeling suddenly going up and down his spine. But before he could speak, there was a cautious footstep outside.

"Halleck?" asked a low voice. "You all right in there?"

THE eyes of the man on whom he held the gun widened suddenly. In the faintest whisper Staples warned, "One squawk and I let you have it!" Bill had no compunction now about what he was doing, for what had started in his head as the glimmer of a dread idea had now flared into positive conviction.

"Uh-huh!" he muttered, trying to make his voice sound like that of the man before him. "Come in!"

The door was pushed inward but just as he heard the squeak of its rusted hinges, Staples reached over and pinched out the candle between thumb and forefinger of his left hand, at the same time jamming the gun between Halleck's ribs. Then, as he saw the head and shoulders of the newcomer silhouetted against the moonlighted world outside he moved with the lithe abruptness of a fighting wolf.

In one motion he brought the heavy gun barrel down on the head of the man in the doorway and, as the stranger wilted, Staples wheeled and struck at Halleck. Somehow Halleck managed to dodge, and suddenly the interior of the shack resounded deafeningly to the crash of Halleck's gun. Staples felt the burn of the powder on his cheeks but he

had no time to shoot. He dived below the flash of the other's gun, and his arms went around Halleck's middle.

Halleck's gun roared again as they fell but Staples was crashing his own clubbed weapon toward the man's head. He felt the impact of it, steel on flesh and bone, heard the other give a gurgling sound, then knew that Halleck's struggles ceased.

Hastily, Staples struck a match, knowing that if he hoped to accomplish anything he'd have to work fast. There was no doubt that both men were members of Bart Slade's gang, and there might be others outside. It was possible, too, that the gunshots might have been heard in the nearby gold camp, but his guess was that the stampeders more than likely would be gathered in Slade's saloon and be making enough noise to drown out such a comparatively minor sound which had been muffled anyway by the walls of the shack.

Both men were still out. Staples took their guns, dropped them through a crack in the floor to the river ice beneath. Then, with pieces of rope which Indian Charley used in rigging his fish trap, he bound their feet and ankles. A quick look outside to make sure that nobody was coming, then he went back to Halleck who groaned and tried to sit up.

"Listen," commanded Staples swiftly, "I'm pullin' out of here! Whether I take the pair of you along or whether I leave you here depends on what you do. I know what's comin' off! You want to come clean, or do I haul out of here and leave you and your pard?"

The man stopped moaning and turned eyes in which there was sudden terror. "Slade'll kill me!" he protested.

"He won't have a chance to kill anybody!" Staples declared. "Anyway, if you're so afraid of Slade, why, I won't waste time—" He started for the door, but Halleck gave a cry.

"Wait!" the man begged. "I . . . I'll talk! You can't leave me here like this!"

Staples bent over him again as Halleck began speaking.

Yet when Bill Staples started upstream for the gold camp five minutes later he was alone. There was a scowl on his face, and both hands were thrust through slits in his parka. The right hand gripped his gun.

BUT his manner was almost casual as he pushed inward through the swinging doors of Slade's saloon, and stood there blinking in the sudden light. After the silence of the spring night outside, the bedlam here smote his ears like a blow from a fist. There was a long bar with an almost unbroken line of men before it; others were gathered about gambling layouts at the far corner of the room. But the biggest crowd was grouped opposite the bar where a crudely lettered sign, just below a big wall clock, proclaimed:

BIG BEAVER ICE POOL!
Biggest in Alaska! $100 a share!

Below this was a list of names. Stepping closer, Bill Staples read them off to himself. "Pete Jennings," said the first. "May 4. 12:42 a. m." Others followed, giving the date and the hour which each contestant guessed would be the time when ice in the Big Beaver would start to move. The same names appeared several times, but

with different hours and dates. That gave each man extra guesses, in the hope that one of them would be close to the precious date and hour. But each extra guess cost the man who took it another hundred dollars. "Sure must be money among these stampeders," Staples told himself. "Bart Slade has 'em all excited—and no wonder!" For at the bottom of the list, in bold figures, was the total to date.

"Fifty-six thousand, five hundred dollars," Staples read, then puckered his lips in a soundless whistle. "What's more, these lads are bettin' smart, too!" He noted that none of the guesses was earlier than April 29, which was tomorrow night. "Reckon some of these old-timers know the Big Beaver as well as I do," he soliloquized. "The chechahcos are stringin' along with 'em. But a lot of 'em are still too early. Or would be!" he added, as a thought came to him.

Then he made what seemed to him to be a remarkable discovery. Although he read the long list carefully, twice and then three times, *he did not see the name of Bart Slade there!*

That was puzzling. Slade meant to get away with the ice pool but why wasn't the crook on the list? Probably some of his gang were there; yet why go to the trouble of covering up in that fashion? At that moment he jerked around sharply as a voice spoke in his ear.

"Hello, Staples," said Bart Slade. "You feeling lucky?"

Staples saw the other standing there grinning. The boss of Seven Up wasn't a tall man, but he was broad and in his squatty build there was strength. At the moment he was in shirt sleeves, one hand on his hip, the other holding a cigar which he had just taken from his fat lips. Staples' hand tightened on the hidden gun.

"Luckier," he replied, "than when I saw you last!"

"Then," Slade grinned, "why don't you take a share in the ice pool? She could still stand sweetening!"

"Lost part of my paw in your trap the last time," Staples retorted. "But maybe I'm hard to cure! Still, I don't see *your* name yonder! Maybe if you'd give a guess, I'd go for it myself!"

The suggestion seemed to please Bart Slade mightily. All the while there was running through Bill Staples' mind the conviction that Slade as yet could not know what had happened in the shack downriver. How long would it be before he learned the truth? That was the risk Bill Staples must take. But Slade was speaking again, boastfully.

"Boys," he called out to the crowd, "I never liked a squealer and Staples, here, can't get over the fact that he once played poker with me and lost! But I'm going to give him a chance to get square many times over. If he's sport enough to buy into our ice pool—and I hear he's got five hundred dollars—why, I'm going to make it worth-while for him to risk his few white chips.

"We've got fifty-six thousand and five hundred in the pool now. If Staples will stick in his five hundred, making it an even fifty-seven thousand, I'll buy *sixty* shares myself. That means six thousand dollars I'm tossing into the pool, raising her to sixty-three thousand! That'll show the boys down on the Tanana that we're not a bunch of pikers up here on the Big Beaver!"

The crowd yelled in delight. Hats went into the air. "Let's drink to

Bart Slade, the squarest sport in Alaska!" cried somebody, and there was a rush for the bar.

Staples stared in amazement at the credulity of the stampeders. At the same time he did not forget that Slade had said he had heard Staples had five hundred dollars. "Simpson must have told him," Staples thought in disgust. "Anyway, I'm in a hole now! Got to put up or shut up!" If things went wrong, he'd have to live on snowshoe rabbits and porcupines during the summer.

Slade walked over to the board and, with a flourish, wrote his name. "Sixty chances mean sixty minutes, boys," he announced. "That's a solid hour. You're all betting that the ice won't start earlier than tomorrow night—maybe a week from now. I'm picking the hour between eleven and twelve—*tonight!*"

won't start movin' for two-three days!"

Slade laughed and shrugged. "What if it doesn't?" he demanded. "I feel lucky enough to say that it will! Anyway, if I lose, the boys get my money, don't they?"

He swung around sharply to face Bill. "Now, unless you aim to dog it like squealers usually do," he declared, "put up *your* money!" He pointed to the board where he had written, "Bart Slade, sixty chances, 11 p. m. to midnight, April 28," and added, "put your name right after mine!"

Staples' mind was working like lightning. The boldness of the gambler's play was astounding; evidently he counted on having the crowd with him. They thought he was the squarest sport in Alaska. Staples seemed to hesitate.

Bill Staples felt his pulse thump at the words. So Bart Slade was going through with it! There were murmurs of amazement from the crowd. "You're crazy, Bart!" one stampeder told him. "I looked at that ice just before dark and she

"Only one thing we've ever agreed on, Slade," he said, "is that the ice is goin' out early this year. You've picked the time right up to midnight. Next guess to that is nearly twenty-four hours later. Supposin' I pick five minutes for five hundred dollars

right *after* midnight?"

Slade's eyes snapped with sudden suspicion, and he stared searchingly at the other. Staples could almost read the workings of the gambler's mind. "He figures I know somethin'," Staples surmised. "But," he chuckled inwardly, "he doesn't know what I'm wise to!" Even then Slade might have balked, but the crowd took the play away from him.

"Sure!" they yelled. "Let this short sport take the next five minutes! Ice won't go out for a long while yet. His five hundred will sweeten up the pot for the lucky man!"

Staples grinned triumphantly at Slade and laid the five hundred on the bar, all the money he possessed. Then he wrote his name, the date and the time: "Midnight to 12:05 a. m., April 29." An old sourdough by the name of Collins had the time and date nearest to that: "9:32 p. m. April 29."

Staples stepped back against the wall and flipped out the six-gun. "Don't be scared, boys," he announced cheerily. "This is no hold-up. But I've got all the money I made trappin' last winter tied up in this ice pool, and I aim to see that she's run accordin' to Hoyle. Ten minutes to eleven," he added, glancing at the clock. "That's when Bart Slade's first guess takes effect. We'll wait here, *and nobody leaves this place until midnight!*"

THERE was an astonished hush at his words. Then Bart Slade came to life. He swung around on the crowd.

"You going to let him get away with this?" he demanded. "How do we know he hasn't rigged up some scheme to win the ice pool by a trick?" But Bill Staples, leaning easily against the wall, his gun wavering over the crowd, merely smiled.

"There's no trick, boys," he assured them, "unless Bart Slade has one up his sleeve! We'll stay right here and wait—unless somebody feels lucky enough to shoot it out! But, why go to that trouble? That clock with the wire tied to it will give us the official time. All we got to do is to sit tight!"

Maybe they didn't like it, but none of them cared enough to force the issue. "After all, boys," one old-timer said finally, "we've got nothin' to lose! If the play is on the square, there's no harm done. If it *isn't* on the square, why we can call a miners' meetin' mighty fast! Let's h'ist one while we're waitin'!"

They drifted back to the bar, eying Bill Staples, talking among themselves and watching the clock. Eleven o'clock came and went. Then eleven fifteen. Bill Staples shifted his position, but without relaxing his watchfulness. Slade tried to hide his nervousness by setting up round after round of drinks, yet he, too, kept close watch on the clock.

Doubt and confidence battled in Staples' mind. One moment he was certain that things were going to turn out as he had expected; the next moment he was sure that his plan had gone wrong. Eleven thirty. Eleven forty-five. Silence had fallen over the crowd now as the clock ticked off minute after minute—and each minute tolled away a hundred-dollar chance Bart Slade had taken. Eleven fifty. Eleven fifty-five. No longer was Bill Staples watching the clock; he kept his eyes fixed on the crowd, and on Slade in particular. For, as the last minutes of Slade's sixty chances vanished, the gambler apparently came to a grim decision. He started

edging along the bar, but Staples' gun lifted threateningly and the man stopped. Staples himself was taut with expectancy. The thing *must* happen soon! Just then there was a yell from the crowd. The hands of the wall clock had come together at midnight! Slade had lost.

Staples laughed in relief. "There goes your six thousand and any hope of winnin' this ice pool," he told the gambler. "You—" But he broke off as a muffled, thudding sound which seemed to run through the ground until it made glasses on the bar tinkle musically, came to their ears. "Must be thunder," said somebody. "Never heard of a storm this early."

"Not thunder!" declared Staples. "*Dynamite!* And that crooked polecat had it planted in the ice below the bend to start the break-up. But I tied up Slade's two guards and made one of 'em tell me the story. They had the fuse connected with an alarm clock set to go off between eleven and midnight. He made that play about takin' sixty chances just to make it look good, but he knew he was playin' a sure thing! It would have been a sure thing, too, if I hadn't changed the clock so she'd go off *after* midnight!"

"He's a liar!" raged Slade, backing away from the men who had turned toward him menacingly. "He put dynamite in the ice and set the clock so it would go off *on the time he'd guessed!* He's tricked you out of the pool!"

But Staples laughed again. "Changed the clock," he admitted, "but I hauled out the dynamite and put it on the bank instead of in the ice. Send a bunch down to that shack and you'll find Slade's men," he told the crowd. "They're still so scared for fear I'd leave the dynamite under the shack that they'll talk plenty. You'll see the hole in the bank, too! You'll—" But at that instant Bart Slade made his play. His right hand whipped under the bar, and when it reappeared there was a gun in it. He fired before Staples could go into action; but the latter's gun chimed in with the second shot. It seemed to Staples that lights blazed, then darkness came like a thunderclap.

He awoke to find himself lying on a blanket spread over a table in the same room, his rolled-up parka under his head, while around him was a ring of faces, grim yet sympathetic. The old sourdough, Collins, nodded to him approvingly.

"You'll make it," he told Staples. "Bullet nicked your skull, that's all, but you've been asleep quite a spell. But you sure hived the bumblebee, Bart Slade! Died on us before we could call a miners' meetin'. Still we passed judgment on the rest of his crowd—they're wolf bait down by the river. Seven Up is honest again, thanks to you. Every word you said was true!"

Suddenly Collins grinned. "How's it feel to be rich?" he asked. At Staples' look of astonishment he added, "Ice broke up and went out an hour ago! You won the pool because your guess was closest!"

"But that dynamite—" protested Staples.

"Had nothin' to do with it," Collins replied. "Warm chinook rain started right after your gunfight, and by daylight the ice was startin' to move. Your hunch was an honest one. Sixty-three thousand dollars! Reckon you can develop that mine you've been babblin' about in your sleep!"

THE END.

OUTLAW'S RETURN

BY DON ALVISO

RIDING south out of Calico in late afternoon, Dan O'Brien knew that the kid was following him, and he resented it. O'Brien had been trailed by too many lawmen to feel comfortable with anyone riding at his back, even a wet-eared button.

Back there at the saloon, Dan had seen the youngster studying the face on the reward poster, then turning furtively to scan O'Brien's dark features as if to make certain of a fact that should have been at once obvious, in spite of Dan's more recent black spade beard. Dan figured the kid for just another maverick who'd gotten into trouble, and decided to ride the back trails. He knew the pattern. The young ones, turning wild, always wanted to team up with an old hand.

But Dan O'Brien rode alone. He didn't want a partner, least of all a kid. Well, he'd get rid of him soon enough. He'd camp tonight at the edge of the mesa, and tomorrow he'd drop down onto Red Desert. If the kid was fool enough to follow him onto that devil's dance hall, it was his own funeral. There were only two waterholes on that dehydrating stretch of blistering sand, and it wasn't likely that this kid could track a desert-wise man to either of them.

A half hour after sunset, Dan pushed his big bay down the winding trail and made camp by the spring in the willow grove under the mesa rim. He had water boiling for coffee, and bacon sizzling in the pan, when the kid rode up out of the shadows and dismounted.

"Howdy," the boy greeted him. "Room for one more?" He said it timidly, and came over to heel down at the ragged edge of the firelight.

O'Brien nodded silently and threw another handful of broken mesquite onto the coals. Past narrowed lids he leisurely studied the kid. Pitifully young; couldn't be more than sixteen. Kind of lonesome-looking, and so lean that the big gun slung low at his flank seemed badly out of place. His clothes were clean, but faded and threadbare. His thin blond features wore a surly, insolent look, and that fitted the pattern, too.

That was the way kids got started on the crooked trail. They got so mad about something it turned into a grudge. Then they nursed it along until it became a gnawing canker, and soon after that they started out to rob and kill. Too bad, Dan thought, but it was no affair of his. Wherever this one had come from, he'd probably left in a hurry. Glancing at the kid's worn-out saddler, Dan saw there was only a thin bedroll back of the cantle. No grub sack. No water bag or canteen.

"Hope I ain't crowdin' yuh," the kid said quietly from across the fire.

"Well, I didn't ask for company," Dan answered pointedly, "but we're on open range, and I guess one man's got as good a right as another." He took a handful of dry biscuits from his grub bag, poured himself coffee, and dumped the crisp bacon onto a tin plate, noting the kid's hungry eyes following his movements. He'd be asking for a handout in a minute. These young ones were that way.

"Fellers call me Slip," the kid said, gazing uneasily into the blaze.

"Good a name as any," Dan grunted, and started in on the bacon.

The low voice went on evenly: "A long ways back on the trail I got a tip you was headed this way. I been ridin' hard to ketch up."

O'Brien's narrowed lids widened a little. "Well, I've been followed before, though I ain't sayin' it's a healthy pastime." He took a swallow of scalding coffee, and added: "I don't usually leave much sign on my back trail."

THE kid cleared his throat. "Well, I hear things. For instance, I heard about how yuh got your pitcher on the reward poster, and how there's an old score down on

Dan pulled the kid away from the pool—Graveyard Well was the only waterhole in that burning sink, but it was poison!

Tondro range yuh'd like to even up. I got business down there, too. That's why I trailed yuh. Thought we might team up."

Team up, eh? Dan had known that was coming. Well, he didn't give a damn what happened to this Slip kid, but he didn't want him trailing along. He jerked his head briefly. "I see. We throw in together and clean up this Tondro business. And then what?"

Slip moved his thin shoulders. "Well, it's a big country. Stages are haulin' gold out of Death Valley, I hear. And there's some fat mine pay rolls goin' overland into Arizona."

"Guess you hear things, all right," Dan said acidly. "You got it all figured out, haven't you? Big money. Get it easy and quick. And what the devil good will it do you—if, and when?"

"I got use for it," Slip replied, and let it go at that.

Close-mouthed, the kid was. And yet, he seemed kind of timid. Maybe he could be scared out.

"Ever kill a man?" Dan asked, eying the kid's gun hanging awkwardly in its stiff new leather.

Slip shook his head. "No—not yet." His look went to the bacon grease in the skillet, and he licked his lips.

"It ain't exactly a pleasant feelin'," Dan went on, "but on this trail a man's bound to cut down a few. Then his face shows up on a reward poster, and he's got to kill more to keep from bein' caught. But soon or late, he gets caught anyway, and ends up doin' the rope dance. Ever see a man hanged, Slip?"

"No. But that don't make no difference." The kid's nostrils quivered at the fragrant coffee aroma. "I wouldn't 'a' hunted you up 'less I figgered I could take my medicine when the time come. I'm guessin' yuh're headin' back to Tondro. I'm goin' there, too. Along with you, or forkin' it alone."

Dan couldn't miss the determination in the kid's soft-spoken words, and somehow he couldn't utter the harsh rebuff that came to his own tongue. He went on eating, but the food had lost its flavor. Some nagging old memory of his own boyhood made it stick in his throat. Finally he slid what was left of the bacon around the fire, and tossed his empty tin coffee cup to the kid.

"A ranny without brains enough to carry grub and water would sure go a long ways on the owlhoot," O'Brien growled. "Fill yore belly and then take care of your nag. He can't stand there all night with the saddle on."

The kid's hands trembled as he went at the food. He was darn near starved, Dan observed. But he didn't wolf his grub down like some would. This Slip had something real inside of him, but that wasn't going to make any difference. No matter what other crimes he was charged of, nobody could ever say that Dan O'Brien helped steer a kid onto the outlaw trail.

Dan spread his blankets back away from the fire, propped an elbow against his saddle, and leaned back, watching the kid eat. Slip finished the coffee and bacon, then swabbed the grease from the skillet with chunks of dry biscuit, which he chewed leisurely, but with evident relish. He unsaddled his horse, led him to the spring to drink, and then hobbled him. After he spread out his own blankets on the far side of the dying fire, Slip unbuckled his gun belt and started to loop it over the saddlehorn.

"Better toss that over here," Dan

said curtly. "I'll sleep better that way."

The kid hesitated a moment, thin lips parting, but he didn't speak. He obeyed the older man's order, and when belt and holster landed at the edge of O'Brien's blankets, the big gun slipped free. Dan's gaze went to the walnut grips, to the inset design of silver showing white in the faint glow of the coals.

Something clicked in Dan's mind, and he snatched up the gun, holding it close to study the silver design. It was an A and a B intertwined, and, seeing that, Dan remembered the gun and the man it had belonged to.

He sat up abruptly and glared at Slip's reclining figure. "How'd you get Anthony Bascom's gun? You ain't his kid? No, you couldn't be. He only had two boys—Yancy and Tom."

"No, I ain't Bascom's kid." Slip's voice came low and even from the shadows. "But I come by that gun honest. You can take it or leave it."

"But," Dan persisted, "you sort of resemble old Bascom."

"All right," the kid said. "You can call me Slip Bascom. I guess names don't matter much, no how."

DAN'S dark brow furrowed. His lips parted and then closed in a thin firm line. He shoved the gun into its holster and lay back, with his head on his saddle, but not to sleep. The kid's talk had dug up the past like moldery white bones from an uprooted grave. While his restless eyes prodded at the stars, Dan was remembering that day seventeen years ago when he'd ridden away from Tondro range. Remembering how he'd stopped once on a ridge to look back, knowing that he was leaving all his hopes and twenty-three years of his life behind.

Leaving it behind forever, he hoped; but he knew old wrongs would always nag at him, old memories would haunt him. For one thing, he'd never be able to forget that his dad's OB spread, and a dozen other small outfits like it, had been peaceful and prosperous until red-bearded Sam Corvell came to Tondro range.

Calling himself the Corvell Cattle Co., the newcomer forced his opening wedge into Tondro by buying Joe Westberg's two-bit outfit in the eastern foothills. Westberg was little liked by the old-timers, and when Corvell, by adroit scheming, had Westberg made sheriff, it didn't help matters any.

Immediately, the Corvell Cattle Co. began to spread out, increasing its holdings by fair means or foul. Some of the more timid ranchers sold out for almost nothing, and took jobs riding the Three C brand. But the O'Briens, followed by their neighbors, the Bascoms, organized the remaining small outfits to resist the encroaching power of Sam Corvell.

Dan knew he'd never be able to forget the years of bloody range war that followed. Sheriff Westberg suddenly acquired twenty shifty-eyed deputies, shipped up from the border, and paid fighting wages by Corvell. Dan's dad was killed almost at the beginning, leaving Dan to lead the fight. Then a year later, when thousands of Tondro cattle were bunched in Lobo Canyon for the big fall roundup, there was a mysterious night stampede. Dan's two younger brothers lost their lives that night, and organized rustlers escaped with most of the beef.

The war went on, Corvell fighting under a pretense of law, and the Tondro men fighting as their kind always had, for what they believed

to be theirs by right. At the beginning there had been four O'Briens; now only Dan was left. He was engaged to marry Sally Bascom, old Anthony's only daughter, but the range war cancelled that. Sam Corvell had his greedy eyes on slim, golden-haired Sally, and jealously concentrated all his vicious hate on Dan O'Brien.

Sally's older brother, Yancy, said that if she'd marry Corvell it would end the war, but the girl hated the red-bearded range grabber. Yancy and Dan quarreled, and Dan had left Tondro. He had never gone back, but he didn't forget Corvell. Supplies were hauled in to the Three C outfit from Yuma, and the regularity with which the big freight wagons were looted was maddening to Corvell. He knew who was responsible, because Dan intended for him to know. One empty wagon and its driver would always be allowed to escape to carry word back to Tondro, and then the price on Dan O'Brien's head would be raised another notch.

And now Dan was tired of dodging and running. He was going back to Tondro—to kill Sam Corvell. After that, he didn't care. The law would trap him sooner or later anyway. At forty, Dan felt that his life had been lived.

DAN awakened the kid before dawn next morning. While they sat eating a hasty breakfast, Dan noticed a lone rider on a pinto coming down off the mesa trail. The fellow kept well behind the brush, and so far the kid hadn't noticed him. The meal over, Dan filled one of his two water bags and handed it to Slip.

"I'm givin' you an hour start," he said gruffly. "If you take my advice, you'll head back over the mesa. But, either trail you take, I don't want to set eyes on you again. Understand?"

The kid nodded. Why shouldn't he understand? Men didn't have to be told twice to stay out of Dan O'Brien's way. Slip hooked the water bag over the saddlehorn and swung onto his shaggy roan. He jerked his head at Dan again and mumbled:

"Thanks. Guess I'll be goin'."

"Wait," Dan said, as if suddenly remembering something. He hacked his bacon slab in two, wrapped one chunk together with a handful of biscuits in a piece of greasy paper. He tossed the bundle to the kid and said: "Now, ride!"

Slip rode. Not over the back trail up onto the mesa, but straight south, heading onto Red Desert. When the boy's slight figure had disappeared behind a hump of drifted sand, the rider Dan had spotted on the downward trail a half hour before came round the far edge of the willow clump. This man was lean, but big-boned. His narrow face was covered with coarse sandy bristles, and hair of the same shade grew low on his forehead above a pair of shifty squinted eyes.

"So we meet again," the newcomer said, dismounting. "It's been a long time, Dan."

O'Brien nodded, and answered guardedly. "A long time since the Bascoms and O'Briens fought side by side down on Tondro. How're the folks, Yancy?"

"Ain't you heard?" Yancy Bascom's tone carried a half snarl.

"I left Tondro seventeen years ago," Dan reminded him, "and I've never been back. Last I heard, you folks was still hangin' on."

Yancy Bascom stretched his big shape out over the spring pool and drank noisily. When he had finished, he wiped his mouth on the

back of his grimy hand, squatted on his heels, and cast a narrow sidewise glance up toward O'Brien.

"Well," Yancy said finally, "same thing happened to us as happened to the O'Briens and others that tried to buck the Corvell outfit. Dad and Tom were found dead one morning on Corvell range. Rifle bullets. Went clean through, but it wouldn't have took no gun expert to say the lead came from behind. Sheriff Westberg pretended to look into it. Said Tom and Dad had been killed while rustlin' Three C beef. He said he figured I'd been with 'em, but had got away. So, I left Tondro before Westberg had time to figger any further."

"And Sally?" Dan questioned tensely. "She . . . she's—"

"Dead, I reckon," Bascom replied, avoiding the other's gaze. "I ain't heard of her for years."

"You had breakfast?" Dan's voice was bleak, his eyes suddenly misty.

"Yeah. I et back at Calico. I heard back there that you an' the kid was headed this way, so I didn't lose no time ketchin' up."

"What do you know about this kid?" Dan demanded.

"Plenty!" Yancy Bascom scowled. "He goes by the moniker of Slip, but his real name's Tony—Tony Corvell."

O'Brien stiffened. "Sam Corvell's kid! You sure of this, Yance?"

"I ought to be. I spent three years huntin' him up. But it was worth it. Once I'd spoke my piece, the kid was all primed to ride down to Tondro and pump lead into Sam Corvell."

"Kill his own father!" Dan said incredulously. "You're talkin' double, Yance. Speak plain!"

Yancy Bascom tore a chew off a dirty plug, his stained teeth showing past an evil grin. "Well, it ain't so hard to figger. This Slip kid don't know Corvell's his old man. On account of Sam bein' the skunk he is, his wife run off from him when the kid was a couple months old. Sam never bothered to look for 'em, but I did—when I got around to it. You an' me both'd like to see Corvell dead, but neither of us can go back to Tondro and plug him without stickin' our neck in a noose.

"So when I found Slip, an' got to drawin' him out, and learned that his maw had never told him who his dad was, I got the idee. I made up a good story about how Sam Corvell had killed this Slip kid's dad, rustled his cattle, an' stole his ranch. Slip took it jist like I figgered he would. I give him my own dad's gun, the one with the silver initials on the butt, you remember? And Slip forks his bronc and starts ridin' south to kill Sam Corvell."

Dan shook his head slowly. "It's no good. We've got to stop the kid."

"Stop him?" Yancy sneered. "After I spent three years layin' this deal out? No, I guess not. Use yore noodle, Dan. Slip will kill Corvell and then Sheriff Westberg will string the kid up. Me 'n' you can handle Westberg. After that there's nothin' standin' in the way of us splittin' Tondro between us. We can buy off the law, same as Corvell's been doin' all these years."

"And how about all the other small cattlemen whose range Corvell has hogged up?" Dan asked.

"The devil with 'em!" Yancy spat into the cooling ashes. "I planned this, and I'm goin' to reap the profit. I'll count you in if you play it my way. Otherwise, don't you try to stop me."

Dan moved toward his hobbled horse. "I'm stopping the kid! Kill

Corvell yourself, if you want to, but don't lie a kid into murderin' his own dad!"

Dan caught the flashing movement of Bascom's arm out of the corner of his eye. Yancy's gun was out, and Dan took the only chance he had. As the roar of Yancy's shot shattered the morning air, Dan fell forward onto his side, drawing as his body hit the sand. Bascom fired again, but that shot missed, too, because the instant before it left the muzzle, Dan's gun coughed, and Yancy's weapon hurtled from his hand.

Dan got to his feet, his barrel lined on Yancy as he closed up the distance between. Yancy saw Dan's thumb drag back on the hammer, and involuntarily his shaking hands went over his head.

"Don't shoot, Dan!" he whined. "I was only bluffin'. I wouldn't've plugged yuh. Take that gun offn me, an' I'll do anything yuh say. I'll even ride after the kid, an' tell him I lied. I'll—"

Dan shook his head, continuing his relentless advance. "I'll go after Slip," he said quietly, and the other man heard the click of the cocked hammer.

"Don't shoot me!" Yancy begged. "Yuh couldn't kill Sally's brother, could yuh, Dan? Yuh ain't forgettin' yuh was in love with her once, are yuh? For her sake, let me go, an' I'll promise never to cross yore trail again."

Hearing Sally Bascom's name, Dan's gun wavered. Some of the cold fire left his black eyes and he stopped ten feet from Bascom. "All right," he said finally. "Start out, and keep going! Ride north, and stay away from Tondro."

Dan watched Yancy Bascom mount and ride up the trail, to disappear over the mesa rim. Then Dan filled his water bag, saddled, and rode south into the growing heat and thickening haze of Red Desert. So Sally Bascom, her father, and her brother Tom were dead! The three good Bascoms had to die. What a pity! And what a grim jest it was that Yancy, the black sheep of the family, lived on.

DAN rode south all through that burning day. At sunset he gave his tired bay an hour's rest, and then pushed on. It was after midnight when he made dry camp in the lee of a rearing boulder. Long before dawn he was awake again. He drank sparingly from the almost empty water bag, and then filled the crown of his hat for his thirsty horse.

In the blistering glare of high noon Dan caught sight of Slip Corvell a half mile ahead. The kid was swaying in the saddle, and past him Dan could see the haze-shrouded bulk of the granite needles which marked the site of Graveyard Well.

Slip had sighted the waterhole, and in an effort to urge his tired roan forward, he made the mistake of rising in the stirrups. Dan saw him reel giddily and fall. But the kid didn't give up. On hands and knees he began crawling toward the brackish pool. Dan yelled at him, but Slip did not hear. Before Dan could reach him, the boy's clawed fingers were digging at the muddy bank, his eager lips reaching for the water.

Weak from heat and thirst, Dan flung himself from the saddle, staggered forward and jerked Slip away from the pool.

"Don't!" Dan croaked hoarsely, the words rasping painfully from his parched throat. "Poison—arsenic—that's why they call it—Graveyard Well—"

Slip rolled over onto his side, sat

up, swaying. The look on his young face was more surly than before. His cracked lips curled back, and his bloodshot eyes glared hate at Dan O'Brien.

"Yo're lyin'!" the kid accused. "You sent me out here to choke to death, and yo're jist sore 'cause I found the waterhole. I'm goin' to drink, an' don't you try to stop me!"

"Don't—Slip—" Dan took two unsteady steps forward, then halted abruptly. The kid's gun had leaped up, wavering in his trembling grasp. Crazed by heat and thirst, Slip triggered, aimlessly, and Dan felt the hot rip of lead at his shoulder. It slammed him backward, but he kept his feet. For a moment it didn't occur to him to draw his own weapon. Then the kid had slumped, unconscious, his smoking gun barrel buried in the soft red sand.

Dan's hand went to his left shoulder, came away sticky with warm blood. The sight of it, the searing pain, the heat and thirst, maddened him. His gaze turned hard and contemptuous, and his full lips thinned in a bleak smile. What a fool he'd been not to play it Yancy Bascom's way! After all, wasn't this Sam Corvell's kid that had just plugged him? And hadn't he already taken enough from the Corvells? Dan's laugh was a hollow, rattling sound. Let the kid lie there and die. What did he care? It wouldn't be as good that way as the way Yancy had planned, but good enough. Dan could get out of this somehow, even wounded as he was. He had crossed the Red Desert before.

DAN walked unsteadily to his waiting horse and pulled down the water bag. Only a little left. He had saved that, thinking that maybe the kid— Dan laughed again, pulled the cork, and lifted the bag to his lips. Then something made him look back at Slip again. That resemblance to old Anthony Bascom which he had noticed before. Imagination maybe, but the thought bothered him.

He lowered the water bag, and, like a marionette moved by strings, he staggered toward the kid. Sinking to his knees, he lifted Slip's head and wet the parched lips with a trickle from the bag. Pretty soon he poured a few drops into the kid's mouth. He kept at it, taking it slow, until the bag was empty. And all the time he kept muttering to himself: "Corvell's kid! I ought to let him die!"

Then when Dan eased the thin shoulders back to the sand again, something dropped out of the kid's shirt pocket. Dan eyed it idly for a long moment before he picked it up. Time didn't seem to mean much now. Nothing seemed to matter. Not even getting out of this bake-oven desert, or riding down to Tondro to kill Sam Corvell. Then Dan saw that the thing which had dropped from Slip's pocket was a leather folder, and that there was a picture of a woman inside. His sun-bleared eyes fastened on the woman's face, on her smooth golden hair.

In a flash the whole thing became clear to Dan O'Brien. Slip Corvell resembled the Bascoms because Sally Bascom had been his mother. Why hadn't Yancy told him that? True to her unselfish nature, Sally had married Sam Corvell in the hope of saving her father and brothers from the fate of the other Tondro men who had dared to fight Corvell. And then, after Corvell's gun hands had killed Anthony Bascom and Tom, Sally had taken the child and run away. And she had died, Yancy had said.

With painful effort, Dan roused

himself to action. Once more it seemed important that he get down to Tondro and kill Sam Corvell. Sally was dead, but her son still lived, and with Corvell out of the way, Slip would be sole heir to the Three C holdings. Sally would have wanted it that way, Dan told himself. Perhaps, after all, through Sally's son, justice might be meted out to those Tondro men who had been robbed.

While Dan struggled to lift Slip to the saddle of his roan and tie him there, a stiff hot wind sprang up, whipping the sharp desert sand into a reddish pall. Once, just before Dan climbed weakly into his own saddle, he thought he saw a rider coming from the north, but, dazed as he was, he couldn't be sure, and the thought soon vanished from his numbed mind. So it was that, as Dan O'Brien rode slowly south toward Tondro, leading Slip's roan, Yancy Bascom overtook him and passed him a quarter mile to his right, neither man aware of the other.

Blinded by the fine-driven sand which stung his nostrils and rasped at his bleeding lips, Dan pushed on with little more than instinct for a guide. Somewhere ahead in this man-killing waste was Hidden Well and water fit to drink, but the spot was so well concealed by the monotonous sameness of the landscape that it was difficult to find it, even on a clear day.

Time seemed to drag with no let-up in the swirling cutting blast of hot red sand. When Dan began to see green willows and shimmering water dancing before his eyes, he knew there was no use of trying to hold out longer. Hands gripped around the horn, he finally closed his burning lids, scarcely aware that his spent horse kept on moving—slowly, and with a weary lurching stride.

WHEN things came clear again, Dan looked up to see a full moon shining in a starlit sky. His maddening thirst was gone, and a moist bandanna lay folded over his cracked lips. The smell of smoke from a sagebrush campfire came to his nostrils, and then he heard the sizzle of bacon frying in a pan. Twisting his head a little to one side, Dan saw Slip Corvell bend over and dip up water for coffee, and then Dan knew that by some miracle they had made Hidden Well.

He sat up weakly, the movement bringing a sharp stab of pain to his shoulder. But the wound was bandaged now, and Dan noticed that the sleeves of the kid's shirt were gone. Over their meal Slip explained:

"Guess yore horse must've smelled the water, or else just naturally knowed where the place was. I had a little trouble gittin' myself untied from the saddle, and then I—well, I jist sort of made camp."

Dan nodded, studying Slip's young face in the moonlight. "And knowin' it was only one day's ride out of this oven, you could've filled the water bags and been on your way. You didn't have to stay and wrap up my shoulder, or give me the water I couldn't get for myself. But you did, and I'm wondering why."

"Maybe for the same reason that you kept me from drinkin' poison water back at Graveyard Well—and then givin' me the last swaller in yore bag."

Dan thought that over, and then said: "All right, Slip, we'll let that pass. We'll sort of rest up tonight and then tomorrow we'll head for Tondro."

"You . . . you mean I can ride along with you, after"—Slip's eyes went to Dan's bandaged shoulder—"after I did that?"

"We all make mistakes," Dan answered quietly. "And besides, when a man's out of his head with thirst, he'll do some crazy things. Now if we're goin' to team up, Slip, there's a couple of questions I got to ask, and I want the answers straight. First, I got to know what your right name is."

"It's Tony," the kid replied promptly. "Tony Bascom."

Dan nodded thoughtfully. That seemed to fit. "And now," Dan went on, "I'd like to know what give you the idea of ridin' the owlhoot trail."

Slip hesitated over that one, but he finally got it out. "Well, I guess there was really two reasons. For one thing, it ain't no fun to be broke and hungry. It's been that way ever since I could remember. I didn't mind so much for myself, but—well, it hurt, seein' ma—"

"Your mother—" Dan interrupted tensely, and then checked himself.

Slip nodded. "I couldn't git a job ridin' cause I was so skinny and looked too young. Then I run onto a fella that told me about that deal down on Tondro, and I began to see that the law is sometimes wrong. It protects them that have a lot, and takes away from them that haven't hardly anything at all. So I got to thinkin' it over and decided ma and me wasn't goin' hungry any more. Maybe I figgered it wrong, but that's the way I figgered it."

For a moment Dan couldn't speak. So Sally was alive, living in want! And to provide for her, Slip would rob and kill if he had to. Dan couldn't blame him. The kind of law that prevailed on Tondro wasn't likely to win the respect of a hungry, ragged kid like Slip. All the more reason, Dan thought, why he should square things with Corvell.

"One more thing," Dan said slowly. "I've got a kind of problem that maybe you can help me solve. Now suppose you, a kid that's never had nothin', all at once found you had come into about a million acres of range and a hundred thousand cows. Come by it legally, understand, so that no man could take it away from you. But supposin' this range and these cows had once belonged to other people, poor folks like yourself, that didn't have no other way to live. And supposin' they'd been cheated out of it, one way or another. What would you do, Slip? Give it all back to them it rightfully belonged to, or—keep it yourself?"

"Well," Slip said finally, "I . . . I guess to be square, I'd jist have to give it back to the folks it really belonged to, seein' as they needed it. And maybe then some of them would give me a ridin' job, even if I am only a kid."

A riding job. So, after all, what Slip really wanted was just a chance to make a living. He'd gotten the outlaw idea because it had seemed the only way out. Dan smiled, the first that Slip had seen upon his grim lips.

"That's what I figured you'd do," Dan told him. "And now maybe we'd better get some sleep."

THEY rode early again the next morning, cleared the edge of Red Desert by noon, and topped the ridge overlooking the north edge of Tondro range just as the low sun scraped the western horizon. Down below lay the town of Longhorn, dusty and sprawling, outwardly little changed in the long years of Dan O'Brien's exile. Dan led Slip into

a dimly remembered box canyon where he knew there was water and grass for their horses.

After a slim meal on what remained of their scanty grub supply, Dan spread out his blankets. "Better get plenty of sleep tonight," he advised Slip, and, weary from the long gruelling ride, the kid lost no time in complying. An hour later Dan rose silently and saddled his horse. After a brief glance which assured him that Slip was sleeping soundly, Dan left the box canyon to ride under the early moon down into the town of Longhorn.

The knowledge that Sally Bascom still lived should have made him completely happy, but it didn't. Before this night was over, he was going to kill two men. He would find Sheriff Westberg and Sam Corvell and kill them. He would probably be killed himself, but that didn't matter; he wouldn't die without taking those two along. Somehow, he was sure of that. And another thing was just as sure. In freeing Tondro range, and in clearing the way for Slip and his mother to come into their own, he was giving up all hope of ever seeing either Sally or the kid again. No matter how black-hearted and evil Sam Corvell was, Dan knew he could never look Sally or her son in the eye again with the blood of husband and father on his hands. It was irony—bitter irony, but that was the way it was.

As he racked his horse in front of the Silver Dollar saloon, Dan hoped that seventeen years and the black spade beard had changed his appearance enough so that he wouldn't be immediately recognized. By the crowded sidewalks he guessed this was Saturday night. Almost everybody would be in town. He scanned the faces of men lounging before the lighted saloon window, recognizing three as former Tondro ranchers in spite of their added years. From the looks of their garb, they were probably still riding for Corvell—because there wasn't anyone else on Tondro to ride for. There would be others like them who had stayed on to work for wages on the range they had once owned.

Glancing into the saloon, Dan saw that the bar was clear. Everyone seemed to be out on the street, and Dan suddenly became aware of an expectant tension, a sultry threat which showed on men's faces, in their lowered voices, and hung like an invisible fog on the cool night air. Then his gaze fastened on a pinto at the other end of the rack, and he knew that Yancy Bascom had come to Tondro, had beaten him here. Dan's suddenly sharpened gaze swept the upper street, which was almost as bright as day in the silver light of a full moon and the lamps in the bordering store windows.

Sheriff Joe Westberg stepped out of his office. Abruptly jerking his gun, he yelled at a man who was attempting to escape through the narrow space between the saddle shop and the hotel next door.

"Yance Bascom—stop!" Westberg ordered. "I want you, Bascom!"

Bascom stopped, not in obedience to the lawman's command, but because he saw that the aperture was blocked at the farther end. He hesitated an instant like a cornered animal, then leaped across the sidewalk, ducked under the hitching pole and began firing at Westberg from behind the racked horses. From his place in front of the saloon, Dan saw another figure emerge from the sheriff's office, a hard-faced man whose red beard had begun to fade out into gray.

UNCONSCIOUSLY, Dan's hand went to his gun. The years had been kind to Sam Corvell, but Dan would have known him even though those years had been doubled. He heard Corvell's bellowing voice: "Stand fast, Joe! I'll lend a hand!"

Gun leveled, the range lord sidled along the walk, coming nearer to Dan in his effort to get a clear line on Bascom. Dan's grim lips pulled tighter and his weapon swung up to line upon the heart of the man who had ruined his life and so many other lives.

But the muffled sound of hoofs at his right made Dan turn. Slip Corvell leaped from the saddle and started up the street, drawing as he ran. Dan called his name, but the kid did not seem to hear. Up in front of the hotel Yancy Bascom was still firing. Westberg went down, lying still in the dust, and Yancy darted out from behind the racked horses.

Things were happening fast, and in a way Dan hadn't figured on. There wasn't time to think. Time only to act. Dan started for the kid just as a slug from Corvell's gun cut Yancy Bascom down. Then Corvell saw Slip, and some hatefully burning light came into the man's eyes. Recognition? The frantic confusion of guilty fear? Dan couldn't tell. Corvell's gun swung round to cover Slip, but the kid kept on. In one mighty leap, Dan flung himself in front of the kid, between Slip and his father.

Fire spewed from the muzzle of Corvell's gun, fire that seemed to slap Dan backward and burn through his very heart. Another gun roared, and Dan saw that Yancy Bascom had raised up on an elbow to fire two quick shots at Corvell and then settle back. Sam Corvell's burly shape danced grotesquely for a moment before Dan's blurred vision, and then Corvell pitched forward on his face.

After that there was a lot of cheering and a lot of talk that Dan could only dimly hear. A weight in his chest seemed to be crushing him down, but somehow, even in the blackness that followed, the new hope that had come to the men around him seemed to communicate itself to his numbed consciousness. Tondro range and Tondro men were free again. The keystone of the oppressing arch had fallen. The cowed fear was gone, and even though there might still be fighting ahead before the last shackle was cast off, these Tondro men now had the heart and the will to fight.

DAN O'BRIEN again lost all sense of time, as he had out by Graveyard Well. He only knew that after what seemed ages of darkness, the light came again. The light seemed to shine from the face of a kid called Slip, and beyond that Dan made out a beamed ceiling which he knew belonged to a room in the old O'Brien ranchhouse—the room where he had been born.

Somewhere nearby there was the sound of a woman's light footsteps, the lilt of a remembered feminine voice humming as she worked. Then the kid who had thought his name was Slip Bascom bent over the bed.

"I . . . I couldn't've stood it if you'd died," Slip stammered. "You took that slug to save me, and I want you to know that if there's anything I can do for you, Dan, why . . . why—"

"There's just one thing," Dan O'Brien said, smiling in a queer way that the kid didn't quite understand. "I'd like to meet your mother."

THE END.

RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

In Old Mexico an hombre who works cattle in a pair of white cotton pants and undershirt is a vaquero, whereas if he dresses up in the typical Mexican costume worn by horsemen on parade, he becomes a "charro." Literally, the word "charro" means loud, flashy or showy. In spite of the fact that many Americans use "charro" and "vaquero" synonymously, the average Mexican cowhand is not a "charro" because he cannot buy an elaborate outfit on his fifteen or twenty pesos a month. A "charro" more frequently is a ranch owner, or manager —what we call a "cowman."

Killing and skinning jack rabbits for the market has its dangers, such as the ever-present possibility of rabbit fever. The fever is contracted mainly when a diseased rabbit is skinned, and some of the blood gets into a cut, or any small break of a person's skin. Though not considered a fatal illness, it often necessitates weeks of hospitalization.

Experts on the subject suggest that you should never handle a jack rabbit which appears sluggish when approached, for this is a telltale mark of its illness. If a rabbit is skittish at sight of you, then this is a good omen; otherwise it is good horse sense to pass him up. The safe way to handle all dead jack rabbits is with gloves that reach well above the wrists. The meat of any jack rabbit should be boiled for a long period before it is eaten.

When you hear of the "great staked plains" of the West, you might think of an illimitable land tangled with hordes of meaningless stakes, and you naturally wonder about the why and the wherefore of the stakes.

In the pioneer days a trail across the great plains, extending hundreds of miles, might easily be eradicated by wind, rain and snow. And without suitable landmarks, little of which the plains afforded to the inexperienced eye, a wagon train might easily go astray. It therefore became necessary to mark these trails so that the steady influx of wagons could find the way. Thus the trails were marked with stakes driven into the ground at regular intervals, and from this the great plains received the name, "staked plains."

From a commercial standpoint, the lowly sheep has a considerable advantage over cows, for a cow must die to make money for its owner, whereas a sheep simply gets its wool sheared. But so long as the cow lives, it has an advantage over the sheep, for the poor, lowly sheep must be forever kept on the move while grazing. As the seasons change, sheep are herded from mountain to plain, and back. These trails extend from one hundred to one hundred and fifty miles, while one running from Lovelock, Nevada, is two hundred and fifty miles long. Sheep travel slowly, but it is a grazing law that they must move not less than five miles a day while on the trail.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

Bender tried to club the mule and that was his mistake—Smoky was already on the prod and he cut loose with a slashing attack.

KILLER MULE

BY GEORGE CORY FRANKLIN

SMOKY, the little blue mule with the black mane and tail and zebra legs, had attracted the attention of the bronc peelers on the W Oxyoke Ranch from the day he was foaled. Not only was Dad Wasson, owner of the big horse ranch, disgusted that one of his best brood mares should have mismated with a burro and brought forth a little mule, but the cowboys who rode for the W Oxyoke foresaw trouble ahead, for they all knew that there is nothing any harder to handle on the open range than a wild mule. Moreover, when such a tragedy of bloods is the offspring of a mare that has had the courage and independence to leave the harem of such a stallion as Gold Dust, and roam the canyons of Lime Creek with a big gray jack, the possibilities are startling.

The burro that had sired Smoky was much larger than the small, patient little animals usually found near the camps of the prospectors or packing ore from the mines high up in the mountains to the railroad at Creede. He belonged to a fur trapper by the name of Jed Bender, and was like his master, a lone wolf—at least as far as associating with the burro herds was concerned.

All this was of no interest to little Smoky. From the day he was able to brace his spiderlike legs and

stand, so as to fill his belly with the warm rich milk his mother provided in abundance, the mule had the makings of all the qualities of his parents—courage and cunning, stubborn tenacity combined with the intelligence of his mother and the craftiness of his sire.

The judgment of Fred Groom, foreman of the W Oxyoke that "that little donkey will cause more trouble on the range than a bear in a berry patch," was well founded. Groom's remark was made to his friend, Shorty Welton, the morning the two discovered Smoky standing in a little mountain park while his mother grazed nearby, her brand showing distinctly. At this time Smoky had not yet gained perfect control of his legs, and he very much resembled an animated sawbuck.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Fred," Shorty had enthused, "ain't he pretty? I'll bet by the time he's two years old he'll be able to run away from a deer and out-dodge a tree kitty."

"Sure, and cause more devilment than a squirrel in a woodpecker's nest too," the foreman said gloomily.

"I wish I could buy him," Shorty went on, "do you suppose Dad would sell him to me?"

"Sure he will," Groom said readily. "I'll agree to sell him to you right now for ten dollars, providing you'll catch him and keep him off the open range."

Shorty pulled out a small roll of bills and closed the deal.

This sudden change of his ownership in no way affected Smoky's happiness. It wouldn't have anyway, even if he could have known about it. Just now he was too busy trying to figure out some way to cross a small stream without getting his pretty black hoofs wet, to care about property rights.

Shorty, however, did not forget to complete the deal. That evening he got Dad Wasson's written confirmation of it. So the mule legally belonged to Shorty Welton, almost from the day he was born. If Shorty had been able to follow up his advantage at once, and corral Smoky's mother before the baby mule had learned the use of his legs, a lot of trouble might have been avoided. But the very next day after Groom and Shorty had found Smoky the two men were sent East with a carload of polo ponies, and were gone for a month.

DURING this time Smoky grew from an awkward combination of legs and ears to the slickest, best-shaped young animal on the Lime Creek range. He could outrun any horse colt in the Gold Dust band, and could think up more mischief than a pet coon. Shorty saw him several times during the fall, but he had to drive a horse rake during the haying. The calf roundup followed immediately, so it was well into October before he could make the attempt to catch Smoky.

By now the mule was not only the swiftest animal on the Upper Rio Grande, but the smartest. He daily worked to solve problems for himself that the horse colts were content to trust to the leader of the herd. Smoky trusted no judgment but his own. Once when the stallion ventured within the wings of a branding corral, and so led all the horse colts into trouble, Smoky had avoided it. He had been trotting beside his mother, making a nuisance of himself as usual by nipping at her flanks or tripping her hind legs when he had caught the scent of human flesh. Just because he took

nothing for granted, he stopped to smell of a strange footprint he saw in the dirt. His suspicions once aroused, the mule was as alert as a weasel.

He found the stump of a tree that had been cut and dragged away through the woods to a fence. Instinct warned him to go around that fence and then away from it. He saw two men come out of the brush behind the herd, but instead of running to his mother for protection, as the horse colts did, Smoky laid his long ears back on his neck, slipped through a hole and trotted past the trees until he came to a high point overlooking the corral. From here he got the scent of fresh blood; listened to the terrified squeals of his tortured playmates, and reached the decision that the man smell meant corrals, and that corrals were very, very bad—no place for a mule.

Thus Shorty's plans to capture Smoky received a setback. Smoky kept well back from the herd when it came out to the open that afternoon, and he did not go near any of the freshly branded colts for a day or two, not until a wet snow had washed the last taint of man smell from their bodies.

That winter Smoky's smartness served him well. His hoofs were too small to be used effectively in pawing off the snow, but he soon learned that, by keeping close to one of the old mares, he could get the first bite of the grass she uncovered. As a result he came through the winter in good flesh. When Shorty saw him in the spring, the mule had already shed his winter's coat and was even prettier than he had been as a little colt.

Shorty was not the only person, however, who had seen and admired Smoky. Jed Bender had not only seen the mule frequently, but being a hunter, he was skillful in taking advantage of cover and air currents. Bender had stalked through the spruce, keeping to the windward of the mule until he crept within a few yards of Smoky as he stood sunning himself one bright spring day. Bender gloated over the slender body and sloping shoulders of the mule, noting several points of resemblance to his own burro. He waited patiently for Smoky to turn around, so that both sides of his body were exposed.

"Just like I thought," Bender muttered, "he's a maverick and he belongs to anybody that can put a mark on him."

While Bender was watching, Smoky became conscious of the smell of a sweaty horse, and a moment later of the hated man smell. He walked out into the open, took a good look at the surrounding forest, and then, snorting exactly as an elk would have done, he trotted past where Bender stood behind a tree, and dove into the deepest part of the forest. A moment later Shorty appeared. He had a loop ready to throw and was surprised to find the park empty.

Smoky trotted back until he came to the scent that still lingered in the air; then he followed it, and within ten minutes of the time Shorty had made his first attempt to rope him, the mule followed him across the park and on down the slope until he saw him ride into a trail leading to the W Oxyoke Ranch.

BENDER did not leave the place until he saw Smoky well on his way down the slope, then he hurried back to his camp for ropes and the tools he needed. Next morning when Smoky came to the spring where he usually drank, he found a

fence around the only open water on the mesa. He did not go near the fence but circled it twice before starting for a trail that he knew led through the forest to Fir Creek, three miles away. He was walking rapidly along the path when he felt something touch one front leg. He stopped short, but too late to escape the snare that snapped out of the grass beside him and dropped a loop around his neck.

Smoky rushed forward with a speed and power that would have broken the rope had it been tied to a solid post. But Bender was far too experienced to make a mistake like that. The other end was tied to the top of a strong sapling that yielded to Smoky's plunges just as a good bamboo rod gives to the rushes of a gamey trout, and with similar results. In vain Smoky fought the rope. He rushed one way and then the other, choked himself down, and would have died from suffocation had it not been that the sapling yielded enough to permit a little air to go through his windpipe.

At first Smoky fought with all the terror of a trapped wild thing, but when his fright gave way to fatigue his reason returned, and he began to act more sensibly. Reasoning at last that it was the rope he must attack and not the sapling, he at once began gnawing at the rope. If Bender had not arrived just then, the mule would have freed himself.

From that day Smoky's life became a series of agonizing tortures. Bender broke animals by the most brutal and heartless methods. He forced Smoky to lead by fitting a cruel war bridle over the tenderest part of the mule's jaws and jerking on the lead rope, until it seemed to Smoky that the nerves in his head and neck had turned to white-hot wires.

Bender did not get away with his cruelty without paying a price. Smoky could use his front feet as quickly and accurately as a buck deer, and he fought for his liberty with the same fierce desperation that a wild cat would have shown. Twice he raised lumps on Bender's skull with blows from his small black hoofs. Once he sank his sharp front teeth in the arm muscles of his tormentor. At another time he landed a kick in the groin that put Bender in his bunk for three days, during which time the mule was left tied to a post without food or water.

Smoky's hatred for man grew with each added day of suffering, and by the time Bender had climaxed his cruelty by burning a JB connected, deep in the flesh of the mule's left shoulder, Smoky had been literally educated into a vicious killer. Whatever capacity for love and loyalty he had inherited from his kind old mother had been buried under a mass of unjust torture.

By the time Smoky was three years old, he was as dangerous an animal as any of the wild creatures of fang and claw that roamed the hills of the Upper Rio Grande. His once-smooth body was scarred and saddle-marked, but he was not broken. Every service he gave to Jed Bender was forced out of him against his will; and there was never a time, winter or summer, when he was not a potential killer. Even at that, he was worth all the other pack animals in Bender's string. Once a load had been adjusted to his pack saddle and held in place by a skillfully tightened diamond hitch, Bender had no more worries about it until he wanted to unload.

Smoky could carry even the most awkward pack through the timber without so much as dusting the dry pollen off the aspen tree trunks, and

when the other pack animals gave up and lay down to die because there was no grass to be dug from beneath the snow, he turned to the woodpile and filled his belly with the bark he gnawed from the aspen logs.

There was no excuse for the trapper's failure to feed his animals. Bender was making big money out of his trapping, and the deerskin sacks of gold buried in the ground under his bunk grew heavier each year; but not once did he buy a feed of oats or a pound of hay for the animals that did the heavy work for him.

WHEN Smoky had first disappeared from the Lime Creek range, Shorty had hunted faithfully for him; but a heavy rain the day after Bender had captured the wild mule had washed out all signs and it was not until Smoky was three years old that Shorty, having followed some strays over the divide onto the Fir Creek drainage, saw his mule hobbled in a mountain meadow. Shorty rode up to within a few yards of Smoky and looked him over carefully, giving special attention to the JB branded on his shoulder.

"That's my mule," Shorty decided. "But I never did see that brand before. I wonder whose it is?"

He rode into Bender's camp but did not find out anything about the mysterious brand. The trapper was away, having gone East with a fur shipment.

That night Shorty went into Dad Wasson's office and asked for his State brand book. From it he learned that the brand JB connected belonged to the John Burrows Cattle Co. of Villa Grove. He asked Dad for a week's lay-off, went to Villa Grove and got a bill of sale for his mule. With the paper in his pocket he returned to Fir Creek range. Bender had not returned. Smoky, however, was in the same little park where Shorty had seen him.

Shorty rode up beside the mule and flipped a loop over his head. Smoky sized him up suspiciously. No other man except Bender had ever been this close to the mule, but there was a different scent about Shorty's body, and his voice was more like the sounds that Smoky liked. For one thing, Shorty was not at all afraid of him. He got off his horse, cut the rope hobbles from Smoky's badly inflamed legs and washed the cuts with cold water, the first kindly thing that had ever been done for the mule.

Smoky might easily have batted Shorty over the head as the man knelt beside him, but some gleam of intelligence held him back. Shorty stood up and put his arm about Smoky's neck.

"You've sure had one tough time, donkey," he comforted, "but try and forget about it." Shorty's voice sounded like the music of the birds in spring time to Smoky. He put his nose against the cowboy's shirt and took a long, deep breath. He liked the smell of clean flesh mingled with the tobacco in the little sack in Shorty's pocket.

Smoky noticed that the horse Shorty rode did not dodge or try to get away when the cowboy turned to get on him. None of the animals Smoky knew could be caught by Bender until they had been cornered in a pen, but this horse actually seemed glad to carry a man on his back. It was all new to Smoky, but he was smart enough to sense the difference and to await developments.

That night for the first time since he had walked into Bender's snare, Smoky slept comfortably in a small pasture near the W Oxyoke bunkhouse. His legs did not hurt. There were no hobbles to chafe them, and Shorty had put liniment on them that took away the soreness. Something akin to love was born in the heart of the mule that night, and when Shorty came out of the bunkhouse next morning, Smoky welcomed him with a low, hesitating nicker.

Shorty brought some ground corn and held the pan while Smoky ate it, then he patted the mule on the neck. "You just loaf around and take it easy for a while," he said. "Get some good tallow on those bones. Me and you are going to have some swell times together this fall and winter."

ONE month was all that was required to make a complete change in Smoky's disposition, and to bring back the humor and mischief that Bender's cruelty had dwarfed. He quickly learned to follow Shorty's horse whenever he was allowed to go on the short trips back onto the high range, at which times he carried a light bedroll and two camp boxes containing grub and cook outfit. Nothing tempted him to leave the camp after sundown. If Shorty woke at night he could see Smoky standing guard under a nearby tree, and one night when the scent of a wandering grizzly reached the mule's nostrils, he came to Shorty's bed and awakened him by pawing the blankets.

That winter Smoky had a warm bed of straw in a shed near the horse stable. There was a manger full of timothy and plenty of clear water. Since there were no trips into the mountains now, Smoky paid for his keep by putting on a show whenever he could get anyone to watch him. His favorite amusement was to pull the peg that fastened the gate to the calf pen, where the weaners were being fed, and show his smartness by cutting calves into his own corral.

The following June Shorty decided to go fishing on Fir Creek, about ten miles above the park where he had found Smoky. He rode Tantrum, his own private horse, and Smoky followed with the camp outfit. That afternoon Shorty camped in a spruce forest near Fir Creek, and Smoky grazed in a nearby park.

The mule was now two hundred pounds heavier than when Shorty had rescued him. His wounds had all healed and his body was slick and handsome. He had just raised his head to make sure that Tantrum was not far away when he caught a scent that caused the hair along his neck to stiffen. Jed Bender had seen Smoky's track in the trail, and had followed it.

Instead of feeling fear for himself, the mule trotted across the park, took a quick glance at Shorty whipping the stream with his fly rod, and then galloped back to where Tantrum grazed. It was the first time that Bender and Smoky had met on equal terms. Always before this the trapper had had the advantage of a rope twisted about Smoky's jaw or hobbles on his legs.

Bender saw Smoky standing near Tantrum and picked up a heavy club. "You will run away from me, will you?" he threatened. "I've had to work short-handed all winter on account of not having pack stock enough to carry my stuff. Now you'll pay for your devilment."

Bender's loud talk reached Shorty's ears. He hurried into the

open in time to see the trapper trying to drive Smoky down the trail.

"Hey, you!" Shorty yelled, "what are you tryin' to do with my pet mule?"

"Your mule nothin'," Bender replied angrily, "this critter belongs to me, and he ain't no pet. He's the orneriest devil on this range."

Instead of arguing with the trapper, Shorty whistled shrilly. Smoky loved that signal and he had been taught to come quickly. He spun on one foot and circled past Bender, keeping well out of reach of the club. The trapper rushed forward in an attempt to head him off, but the blow he aimed at Smoky's head fell short, and the mule ran up to Shorty and stood behind him.

Bender came on, his club held high above Shorty's head. "I'll make coyote feed out of you!" he threatened.

Shorty had left his gun in the camp and his only weapon was the little four-ounce rod in his hand. He glanced at Smoky. The mule's eyes were green with rage, and the hair along his back was stiff. He was patting the ground with one front foot. Shorty knew mules. "Look out," he warned Bender, "Smoky is on the prod."

Bender struck furiously but Shorty ducked under the blow and sprang back out of reach, leaving the trapper to face the enraged mule. Smoky's ears went back along his neck, his teeth were bared. He rushed in, taking a blow that barely missed his head and glanced over his heavy neck muscles. His jaws snapped shut on Bender's shoulder. He swung the man around and shook him as if his body were nothing more than an empty grain sack. Then, standing high on his hind legs, he struck with both front feet. Bender fell several feet from the mule, tried to get up and then collapsed.

Shorty rushed up and threw his arms about Smoky's neck. "Don't kill him, Smoky," he pleaded. "You've evened things up pretty well, old-timer. Any more would make both of us trouble."

When Smoky had calmed down, Shorty led him back to camp, tied him to a tree and got his gun. Then he went back to where Bender was now sitting up nursing a badly bruised shoulder.

"Now, what's this about you claiming Smoky?" Shorty demanded.

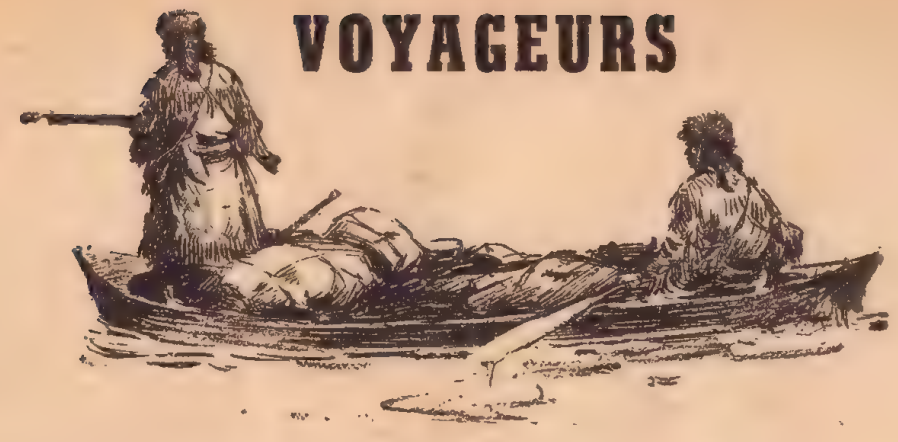
Bender pointed to the brand on the mule. "Them is my initials, the same as I put on all my saddles and fur bags," he growled.

Shorty grinned. "So that's how that JB connected got on a W Ox-yoke mule. Well, you made a mistake putting it there, because that brand happens to be recorded in the name of the John Burrows Cattle Co. It's as legal as a United States patent, and I've got a bill of sale for Smoky. Now get up and beat it before I turn Smoky loose and let him make you pay for what you've done to him. Get!"

And Jed Bender lost no time in "getting!"

THE END.

VOYAGEURS



by DAN SHAW

A SAGA might be written around the adventures of the men who transported the furs taken by the trappers on the headwaters of the several branches of the Mississippi to the frontier town of St. Louis.

From the time when the first rafts and hide boats of the voyage set out on the spring freshets of smaller streams, to the day of the modern shanty boat, the currents of the great rivers have borne some form of water craft south. Men, waiting through the snowy winters at some isolated rendezvous to which the independent trappers would bring their winter's catch, had been preparing for the hazardous journey down the river by building the type of craft best suited to their purpose.

If they had arranged, the fall before, to join forces with some larger party at a point on the main river, they would build a framework of tough saplings over which the untanned skins of buffalo or elk could be stretched, to make a light, easily handled boat or canoe. Such a vessel drew but three or four inches of water, even when loaded with several hundred pounds of furs, and could be manned by two voyageurs, one in the bow and the other at the rear end. These men were not only skilled in handling their craft, but familiar with the obstacles to be avoided, such as falls or rapids. Above all, they were well informed as to what portions of their dangerous trip passed through the country of unfriendly Indians, where travel in the daytime was impossible.

When the day came for the start, the load had been tightly bound in packs that could be carried over a portage and a few simple preparations made. Then the two men would take their positions in the boat, wave a careless farewell to their companions and start on a journey of fifteen hundred or two thousand miles.

For the first part of the journey, the main concern of the voyageurs was to avoid too great speed in the swift current of the crooked streams. They traveled only in daytime, and camped in some pleasant spot near the shore at night. When the Indian country was reached, the boat was hung up under cover of bushes during the sunlit hours, and at night was kept in the shadows as it drifted silently with the current.

After a month of stealthily pitting their woodcraft against that of the wiliest warriors, the voyageurs would turn around a bend in the river and come in view of the main party, transfer their cargo to a large raft and begin the long, easy voyage to St. Louis.

BALLOTS FOR BOOTHILL

BY PETER DAWSON

FOUR days of howling wind and driving snow caught Buckhorn Range unprepared, for the blizzard had struck early, in the first week of November, before there had been anything but a mild freeze. Yet at noon on election day Red Lee, Forked Lightning's ramrod, saw the end of his battle against the storm and let all but four of his crew, led by Bill Shane, his segundo, head for town to vote.

Day before yesterday Red had spent eighteen hours in the saddle, half-frozen and dog-tired, helping his men push four hundred head of cattle down out of fall pasture and into the sheltered canyons that edged the mesa. Yesterday the hours had been even longer, with feed to be hauled to bunches yarded in the arroyos far out on the snowed-in flats.

Up at three this morning, he'd driven the crew relentlessly to the last job of all, strengthening the south drift fence. Now most of the work was finished. He'd won a personal battle against the elements, for no one but a man who could produce more work than the best of Forked Lightning's salty crew would have been able to accomplish so much in so little time. Red was satisfied; he could report to Mike Crag, the owner of the spread, this afternoon that the outfit had come

Red Lee exploded up through the rotten floor of the saloon right into the midst of that crew of killers!

through this stretch of bad weather with little or no damage.

With the crew gone, Red went to the cook shanty for two buckets of hot water and came back to the bunkhouse to relish the luxury of a bath and a shave, a tall man hawk-ish of face, pale-blue-eyed and with curly-blond hair. He whistled at his bath in a way that was rare with him, for these past two years the responsibility of rodding the biggest outfit of Buckhorn Range had sobered him beyond his years, a scant thirty. Today his good humor lasted until he had ridden the ten miles across the mesa and was taking the first of the many hairpin turns in the downward trail that led to the bottom of Rawhide Canyon, with the town of Rawhide in sight. There, looking down on the town and seeing the heavy traffic that moved along its street, Red was reminded of a job he had neglected. He should have been electioneering for Clint Steele, up today for re-election as sheriff.

Clint Steele was his friend; more than a friend, in fact, for Clint had found him his first job here, started him on the way to his present security as boss of a big outfit. But this year work and politics had meant Red couldn't help Clint gather in the votes. Most important of all, Mike Crag had put up his own man, Jeff McBride, to run against Steele for sheriff.

Red knew what was behind that; Forked Lightning had been having trouble with its neighbors, trouble brought on chiefly by the arrogant ways of Bill Shane, the man Mike Crag had sent out as wagon boss last summer. Red hadn't been able to fire Shane, for Crag had bluntly told him that Shane stayed and that if he, Red, couldn't get on with Shane he could quit. Red hadn't quit but had stayed on, seeing Shane go against his orders in prodding the neighboring small ranchers into bitter hatred of Forked Lightning.

Now, on election day, Mike Crag was driving in the last wedge in his campaign to crowd out the small outfits and put all of Buckhorn under his brand. If Jeff McBride won the election today, the old-timers would have to step aside before Crag's new and unbridled ambition. Regardless of the fact that he worked for the Forked Lightning owner, Red had to admit that the man was taking on the habits of a range hog. His pride had rebelled against the knowledge; but a job was a job and he couldn't toss aside one that paid a hundred and fifty a month.

THE Jewel was Red's first stop along the street. The saloon was serving as the polling place. Out front, Red's glance singled Clint Steele from the crowd on the walk. He sauntered over to the lawman, nodded him aside, and asked gravely:

"How does it look, Clint?"

"So-so." Steele's expression was impassive, his longhorn mustache frosty, his face sharp-angled, as though carved from rimrock.

"McBride draggin' in many votes?"

"Can't tell yet, Red."

Red's boots moved nervously on the snow-packed walk. "Sorry I couldn't get out and work for you, Clint," he said.

Steele's eyes lighted with eagerness. "You really mean that?" His voice was no longer impersonal.

"Why wouldn't I mean it?"

A long sigh escaped the lawman's flat chest. He smiled thinly. "Didn't know how you stood, things bein' as they are," he drawled.

"This makes it all right." He nodded toward the swing doors. "Better get in there and cast your ballot. Might not set so good with Crag if you was seen chinnin' with me."

"The devil with what Crag thinks!" Red couldn't define the half-bitter feeling of uncertainty and helplessness that took him just then but it was there.

Steele's smile broadened. "Sit tight, fella," he said, low-voiced, sensing Red's embarrassment. "This is comin' out all right. I've got the thing sewed up."

Inside the saloon the stillness was significant. At the end of the long bar along the left wall stood the ballot box, a barrel with a slit cut in the top. The bar had been moved toward the front a few feet to make room for the barrel and a table beyond it. At the table sat four men, the election judges. Two of these were Clint Steele's friends, the other pair Mike Crag's men.

Across the room the gaming tables had been shoved toward the front and three curtained booths erected at the rear. A notice had been whitewashed across the bar mirror: No Drinks Until After Six.

Men moved about the room quietly, getting their ballots, going into the booths to mark them, then giving them to the judges and filing silently out. The air in here was tense with suppressed excitement. Rawhide was taking this election seriously.

Red voted and was shouldering out the swing doors and through the storm door when a touch on his elbow and a voice to one side, "Boss wants to see you," made him turn.

The speaker was Bill Shane. The wagon boss met Red's direct stare with one that was faintly hostile. As always when brought into direct contace with this man, Red's anger rose. Shane's manner was as arrogant as the look on his face, a face deformed by an ugly knife scar that ran down the left cheek. Just now Shane wheeled away and started down the walk, having given his message.

"Hold on," Red called after him. "Tell Crag I'll see him later. I'm gettin' a haircut." He didn't feel like seeing Crag now, much less like obeying Shane's summons, given flatly as an order.

Shane stopped. "Crag said to make it pronto," he drawled, and with that went on along the walk toward the hotel veranda.

PUTTING down his pride and his ready anger, Red followed. He went up out of the hotel lobby to the second-floor corridor, and along it to the last door to the left, on which he knocked. Mike Crag's gruff voice bid him enter.

The room Red stepped into had been furnished as a temporary office. Crag seldom visited Rawhide, having other holdings as big as, if not bigger than, Forked Lightning elsewhere. Red had been in this room before. He faced Mike Crag across the wide deal desk behind which his employer now sat.

Shane and Jeff McBride, Crag's candidate for sheriff, were the other two occupants of the office. McBride nodded curtly. Crag gave Red no greeting, but rocked back in his tilted chair, the stub of a cigar clenched in his teeth. He was a massively built man, white-haired but with a rugged square face still untouched by age. His outfit was an expensive broadcloth suit set off by a white shirt.

He waved to a chair by the side window that looked down on the alley. Red went over there but took

the window ledge in preference to the chair.

Crag's first words were blunt: "Where's the rest of the crew, Davis, Bates and the others?"

"Workin' fence," Red told him. "Storm tore part of it down."

"Don't you realize we need all the votes we can get?"

Red's face tightened at the curt sting of Crag's question. "They'll be in in time to vote. I told 'em to quit at four."

"They'd better." Crag straightened in his chair, fixing Red with a hard glance. "Shane says you put up a ten-dollar bet that Steele would win."

Red nodded, curiosity overriding his irritation.

"Lee, I don't *sabe* your buckin' your own outfit," Crag said harshly. "You get good pay. You've got a free hand with your work. Yet you cross me when it comes to electin' a man who won't see us skunked in an arrest or in a court of law."

"Steele's my friend," Red stated, adding, "and a good sheriff."

A significant look passed between Crag and Shane.

Abruptly, Crag said, "That ain't all. Shane says you've been playin' a hand with these ten-cow outfits up on the mesa."

Red was momentarily puzzled until he realized what Crag meant. "Because I wouldn't let him shoot down their strays? Because I let Ed Wetherill use our hay rake this fall?" At Crag's answering nod, he said, "It never hurts to be a good neighbor. Wetherill helped us through that Texas fever spell last year."

Crag let a long silence draw out, then spoke flatly: "It's no go, Lee. You can't seem to get it in your head what I'm after."

"What are you after?" Red asked, unable to control his anger now. "Do you want to drive all the other outfits off the mesa? Do you want Shane to prod them until they're taking pot shots at us every time we ride within range of their fences?"

"Let one o' those polecats send a bullet across our wire and I'll burn out every outfit on the bench!" Crag exploded. "Let 'em try it just once!"

"I can't back a play like that, Crag," Red said firmly. "Shane's gone around all fall with a chip on his shoulder. I tried to make him take it easy. He wouldn't. Now trouble's comin'. When it does come, I'll—"

"You'll what?" Crag queried, as Red hesitated.

RED shrugged and turned to the window, looking out along the alley. He wanted to get a tight rein on his temper. He knew now why Crag had sent for him and he was helpless to prevent what was coming, helpless against the outright hostility of these two men. For some obscure reason Crag had brought him here to start an argument and have an excuse for firing him. Bill Shane would probably get his job. With Shane leading Forked Lightning's crew, with McBride in office as sheriff, serious trouble against the small ranchers would soon flare. It was obvious that Crag wanted to extend his fences to take in all the mesa. He, Red, had been nothing but a tool whereby Crag had built Forked Lightning up into a powerful outfit, an outfit that would hereafter be hard to hold within its fences.

And only an hour ago Red thought wryly, he had been as lighthearted as at any time in the past two years, since he'd been hired as Crag's foreman. He'd been proud of the job he'd done these last four days in keeping down the blizzard's

death toll among the cattle. He'd worked his guts out for Crag—and this was his reward!

Instead of mounting, his anger now cooled. He saw Crag for what he was, a vicious land hog who would grow more powerful with each passing year until he had control of this vast range, probably of the town. A week ago Red had listened idly to someone's remark that Crag would some day be elected to the United States Senate. Now that remark didn't seem so improbable. If McBride won this election, Crag would go on to greater power, influencing the appointment of judges until he controlled the courts. Then, with a far-reaching political machine, he could realize any ambition he chose.

While these thoughts had been running through his head, Red had been looking idly down onto the alley, toward the rear of the Jewel. Abruptly his attention was centered there by the sight of a man crawling from under the saloon's rear wall. Even in the fading light of the early dusk, he recognized the man's checkered wool jacket. It was Sam Stacey, Bill Shane's particular sidekick. Sam had left the ranch last night in the tag end of the storm, saying he was drawing his time and leaving the country. It seemed reasonable now to suppose that he'd drawn his pay from Crag, spent a wild night in the Jewel, and probably slept off his hangover under the saloon, as was the regular habit of certain habitual drunks who couldn't negotiate their way home after a spree.

RED had almost dismissed Stacey from his mind when he saw the man straighten from putting a loose foundation board in place, glance furtively up and down the alley and then stuff a wad of pink paper in a pocket of his coat. Stacey's manner struck Red as being odd. But the next moment his attention was jerked back into the room as Crag's low-toned voice broke the prolonged stillness.

"I asked what you'd do when it came to makin' the fight," Crag said.

Red turned from the window to face the desk. "So you admit it's to be a fight? You admit you're tryin' to drive the others out?"

Crag's broad face remained impassive as he nodded. "Why not admit it? I'm makin' each of those outfits separate offers through the bank. They can take my price, or else."

Red's glance swung around on Shane. "So you're the new boss, eh?" He noticed for the first time that Shane's coat had come off while his back was turned, that the man's low-hung holster and his heavy .45 Colt was within easy reach now. He, Red, hadn't worn a gun to town today.

"You ain't been fired yet that I know of," Shane said smugly.

"No. I'm quittin' instead. I'll take my time, Crag."

Mike Crag's bushy brows arched in mock surprise. Then, as though he realized the foolishness of pretending any longer, he reached out across his desk for a checkbook, opened it and picked up a pen.

"How much do I owe you?" he asked.

"Call it thirty bucks," Red said, naming a figure a few dollars under his week's wages since last pay day.

"He wore hell out of a new seventy-dollar saddle scrapin' through that brush up in the hills day before yesterday," Shane put in. "Better dock him for it, Mike."

The familiar "Mike," the arrogance behind Shane's smooth indictment, brought Red up off the window ledge in an involuntary half-lunge of protest. He saw now that Shane had been sent in to spy on him these past months, that Crag had all along intended to displace him with a man who could lead Forked Lightning's crew in a war that would bring more credit to a man handy with guns than one knowing the cattle business.

Red's coming to an abrupt stand sent Bill Shane's right hand lancing toward the holster at his thigh. That move laid a curtain of hot fury across what was left of Red's reasoning power. He hesitated a bare fraction of a second before he reached out and took a hold on the chair Crag had asked him to take a few minutes ago.

All the weight of Red's body was behind the outward heave as he threw the chair. Its back caught Shane as he was moving aside, and knocked his hand away from his thigh. Then, as McBride lunged erect, Red followed the flight of the chair across the room and threw a vicious right uppercut at Shane's jaw.

The blow caught Shane on the point of the jaw, lifted the man's boots off the floor. Shane's legs buckled and he fell back in a sprawl across Crag's desk, already limp in unconsciousness. McBride stepped in, took a hold on Red's arm and spun him around.

All Red's pent-up anger, the knowledge that he had for two years been betraying his friends in working for Forked Lightning, came to the surface now. His fury was a blind one and turned him wild. As his long frame spun around under Jeff McBride's hard grasp, he used it to put more power behind the swing of his free arm, his left. His fist caught McBride on one shoulder, broke loose the hold and sent the man crashing back into the hallway door. Then Red stepped in, spread his boots wide and slugged McBride's face to a bloody pulp before the candidate for sheriff could lift his arms to protect his head.

Behind Red, Crag's voice bellowed: "Stop! Blast you, I've got a gun on your back!"

ONLY then did Red step away from McBride, letting him fall to the floor. Turning, he faced Shane's .45, now lined by Crag's massive fist.

A down-lipped sneer came to the cattleman's blunt, anger-paled face. He drew back the hammer of the .45. "You picked a fight with Jeff," he said levelly. "He cut you down. This iron'll be in your hand when Steele finds you!"

His threat was plain. He was going to shoot Red, shoot him in cold blood. The click of the hammer catch of the gun made that plain.

On the heel of Crag's words, the door knob rattled and the panel

swung inward. Red took a backward step that put the opening in view. Clint Steele stood there, hands on hips, calmly surveying the two men lying on the floor, even more calmly taking in the gun in Mike Crag's hand.

Then the sheriff drawled, "I'll forget I heard that last, Crag. Put that hog leg down before your finger starts shakin'. Shane uses a hair trigger."

Nothing but the lawman's calm remark would have penetrated Mike Crag's rage at that moment. He hesitated but a moment before he let the hammer down and laid the gun on the desk.

"Get him out of here!" he growled, nodding at Red.

Steel reached out, took Red by the arm and pulled him toward the door and out into the hallway. Closing the door behind him, the lawman said quickly, in a hushed voice, "Down the back stairs, Red! You've got maybe thirty seconds before McBride comes bustin' through there after you! And get the hell out of this country quick! I'll do what I can to slow 'em up!"

"Thanks, Clint," Red said. He headed for the dark pit of the back stairway, knowing that Steele spoke the truth. From now on his hide wouldn't be worth as much as a steer's, once Bill Shane and Jeff McBride gathered their crew and started on the hunt.

THE capped half moon was edging over the far rounded hills as Red rode in on the ghostly lighted and deserted Forked Lightning. There was no sign of life but the skulking shadow of a coyote slinking across the white snow mantle toward the gash of a deep wash beyond the far corral. Red had passed the last remnants of the crew, four men and the cook, far back along the trail, headed for town.

From the rim above town he had looked back over a three-mile stretch of trail below and failed to see any sign of pursuit. And coming across the flats he had stopped time and again to listen. He could pick up nothing but the breathing of his gelding, the creak of his saddle leather and beyond that the frosty stillness of the night. At last he was convinced that he wasn't being followed. Clint Steele's hunch had evidently been wrong. Mike Crag and his men had more important business than bothering with a man they knew would take the shortest way out of the country.

Gathering up his belongings in the bunkhouse, Red rebelled at this tail-tucking act of running before Crag's authority. In this last hour and a half he had been given a new look at himself, as though he stood apart and saw the man he had been and the man he was to be. Two years of working for Mike Crag had warped his nature more than he realized. He could see now that his manner had taken on some of the outfit's arrogance. He'd lost touch with his old friends, men like Clint Steele. His fingers no longer felt the pulse beat of this range; he'd been too long away from its solid workings and the privations endured by his neighbors. He was a stranger to Buckhorn Range, a deserter.

Red's last act at the bunkhouse was to strap his gun about his waist and thong the holster low at his thigh. The weapon's weight gave him an assurance he had never before felt. He off-saddled the Forked Lightning gelding and cut his own undersized mare—the horse he had ridden in to the job two years ago—

from the bunch in the barn lot. Heading out the lane, his high-built frame swinging to the mare's choppy gait, he felt more at home and more at peace with himself than at any time he could remember since coming here. It was as though, by this last act of leaving without once glancing back at the layout, he was washing clean an unhealed and festering sore that had galled him too long. And, almost without giving it a thought, he took the trail back to town.

Halfway across the mesa he tried to define the impulse that made him rebel at running away. He was riding back into possible danger. Why? Finally he had it; he was alone now and hungering for companionship and the self-assurance the contact with old friends would give him. It wasn't too late to make it up to Clint Steele and those others who had sided him when he was a plain puncher topping off broncs for two and a half a head. How he'd make it up to them he didn't know.

He saw the black line of the rimrock come up out of the white night toward him. Below and out from the rim lay the town. He'd ride in along an alley, tie the mare behind a shed and go to the jail first to congratulate Clint Steele on winning the election. Suddenly the jarring thought came to him that maybe Clint had lost to Jeff McBride. Then he laughed aloud at the ridiculous idea. Clint had too many friends to lose even to a Forked Lightning man.

He came to the rim and started down the many windings of the trail that hairpinned back and forth, following the natural line of the many steeply descending and narrow ledges. The trail ended almost directly below the point where it dipped down off the rim, having accomplished nothing but a five-hundred-foot drop in more than a mile of length. To the south and far below, the buildings of Rawhide sprawled along the length of the one long street, lamplight from the windows of stores and houses faint against the strong moon glow.

AS he rounded the second turning, his glance still downward, Red saw a lone speck down there streaking out the trail and into the beginning of the upward climb in the bed of the canyon. Then, as he frowned at the sight of a rider pushing his horse so fast, eight more riders came into sight, hard on the heels of the first. And, to lend instant proof to his first suspicion, the pin-point wink of flaming guns dotted the line of the eight men who pursued the lone one. Moments later, the flat explosions of the shots yelled up to him.

Red's lean face took on a wide smile. "Someone gettin' paid an election bet," he drawled aloud, more amused than alarmed at the sight spread out below. The lone rider had a good lead on the others and was out of six-gun range. Red knew Rawhide's elections, the free flow of liquor from Sam Harvey's Jewel the minute the polls were closed at six o'clock.

But as the lone rider made the third turning upward along the trail, the ones below drew abreast of him on the first. Their guns blazed again and now they were within range, for the climb of the trail was only a quarter of its winding distance between the posse and its quarry. Red's face sobered. He was witnessing a man's fight for life, yet he was helpless to assist in any way. His breath caught and held until a wide ledge hid the lone rider

from the guns below. Then only did Red breathe again.

For three more minutes the fight went on, drawing closer. Only once more did the guns speak with any threat, and that once Red saw the horse of the lone rider stumble, gather itself and come on more slowly. The rider was close now three turnings below. Abruptly Red stood erect and stiff in the saddle. The moonlight showed him something unmistakable, the blue-gray color of the lone rider's horse. Clint Steele rode a grulla! And the slight straight figure on the grulla, seeming to float smoothly over his horse's uneven stride, had the unmistakable poise of Clint's faultless saddle manner.

A warning signal of acute danger flowed instantly through Red. He vaulted from the saddle, dropped the mare's reins and ran to the edge of the trail, looking downward and palming out his Colt. Now he could easily recognize Rawhide's sheriff. And, looking far downward, he made out the curious markings on a paint horse in the posse and knew it to be Bill Shane's.

The next few moments dragged to an eternity. Red knew what he must do. But the guns, two tiers below Clint Steele, were perilously close as the lawman's pony labored into the turning directly below Red. Somehow Clint Steele rode through that hail of lead unscathed. Then Red was thrusting a boot against a foot-thick boulder at the edge of the trail, seeing it topple over and downward, loosing others as it fell.

RED stood there awed by the violence of his own act. Directly downward the slope was steep, almost vertical. The falling boulder gathered a powerful momentum so that a moment after it had started its fall it had loosed half a hundred others that likewise added to the destructive force of the gathering avalanche. Out of the corner of his eye Red saw Clint Steele's pony go down and the lawman jump clear. Then he forgot Steele in the face of the sight below.

Tons of earth and rock were roaring down the rim face, tearing up stunted cedars that grew from the rock clefts, ripping whole ledges from their foundations. And, far below, Bill Shane and the riders with him had stopped and were making frantic efforts to turn back, colliding with each other, their one thought to get out of the way of the death that was hurtling down at them. Shane finally broke into the clear and led the downward pell-mell flight. The guns were silent now. Those men were riding for their lives instead of threatening another.

The avalanche completely wiped out the trail's third downward turning. Its fall seemed slow, yet it gained on the fleeing riders relentlessly. They wouldn't have time to ride clear before it engulfed them. Red, horror-stricken at the death he had loosed down on them, couldn't take his eyes away.

He cried, "Ride clear, Shane! Off the trail!" an instant before Shane realized his position. Then, as though they had heard his cry above the roaring tumult of the rock slide, the third man in line picked a narrow long ledge and rode out along it, out of line with the avalanche. Shane, looking back over his shoulder and seeing, reared his pony on its haunches, spun the animal around and followed the others who were riding clear.

The moving wall of rock roared down and beyond them, wiping out

all trace of the lower trail until finally, in a fog of dust and snow, it settled to rest in a huge mound on the valley floor.

Shane and his companions looked upward. A man near him raised a fist and shook it toward the rim, shouting something that was lost by distance. Then Shane came down out of the saddle and led his pony off the ledge, picking his way gingerly toward the canyon bottom.

"Nice friendly bunch, ain't they?"

came Clint Steele's voice close by. Red turned to find the lawman standing a few feet away, looking down at Shane and the others. Steele added: "Thanks, Red. I thought my number was up."

"Who was with Shane?"

"McBride, Evans and I don't know who else. Crag's crew."

"But I don't get it. Why were they after you?"

"Tried to prod me into a fight when I challenged the vote count. Trouble is, I was alone. When I left the Jewel to get me some help, Shane followed me out and pushed me off the walk. They ganged up on me, so I jumped my jughead and ran."

"You challenged the vote count? Why?"

"I lost. By nine votes." Steele sighed wearily. "And last night I added 'em up and thought I'd win by at least fifty."

THE impotent feeling that welled up in Red left him speechless. He was feeling the turn of affairs more keenly than at any time since he'd left Mike Crag's hotel room.

"Oh, well, I can always go back to runnin' cattle," Steele said. He glanced down at his pony lying in the trail and added gently, "Sally there did some noble running tonight. Didn't know she had it in her."

"Let me get this straight, Clint," Red said slowly. "They stuffed ballots on you?"

Steele shrugged his bony shoulders. "Sure. But try and prove it. The right number of ballots came out of that door in the bottom of the barrel; only a few of 'em was marked the wrong way. Guess I counted a bit strong on my friends. Pink never was my color and them tickets were pink."

"Pink!" Red breathed, a forgotten memory striking across his mind. Abruptly he reached out and clenched Steele's thin arm in a hard grip. "Pink! That's it! This afternoon I saw Sam Stacey crawlin' out from under the back of the saloon, stuffin' a handful of pink paper in his pocket. Doggone it, I should have known it then!"

"Known what?" Steele demanded.

"Why, Stacey was under there. Don't you see it, Clint? Stacey sided Bill Shane when he signed on with my outfit. He quit last night, complainin' that the work was too heavy. He meant to quit all along. Crag needed him here in town to help cheat you out of office. He did it by changin' the ballots from underneath the floor."

"But how, damn it!" the lawman exploded impatiently. "McMillan and Baker were there at the table from the time the polls opened until that barrel was turned bottom up and emptied. I was there to witness the vote count. There wasn't no hole through the floor."

"How sure are you? Remember, the bar was pushed up toward the front. Did you get a look at the floor before they pushed it back after movin' the barrel away?"

"No, by thunder!" Steele slammed a clenched fist into his open palm. "Why would I think o' that? Here's another thing. Harvey sold the Jewel to Crag yesterday. Crag put a new man in to run it last night. Closed it for a couple of hours early this morning', too, to rig the votin' booths and get things arranged."

For a long moment they both stood there, taking in the full implication of Red's discovery and the information Clint had added.

Finally Red drawled, "We'd better get down there, Clint."

"What good'll it do? Who'll believe us?"

"Plenty of people. If we work it this way." And Red went on to explain what he meant.

THE bar at the Jewel was packed as Clint Steele came in through the storm door better than an hour after he and Red had ridden double down off the rim. The lawman's longhorn mustache was rimy with frost. He squinted into the glare of the lamps, breathing the fouled air of the smoke-fogged room. He had a moment in which his sharply inspecting glance took in the scene before he was recognized. And that glance told him that little of the Jewel's former friendliness remained with the change of ownership. Mike Crag's men had taken over the place tonight.

At a table at the foot of the bar, Mike Crag, Jeff McBride and Bill Shane drank with three gun-belted men who were strangers to Steele. Two newcomers who had come in on yesterday's stage tended bar. Forked Lightning men and a large number of townsmen bellied the bar, the latter mostly individuals whose loyalty was to be bought by the outfit that brought them the most business, which meant that they were at present friendly to Forked Lightning and its owner. The same held true of the players at the three poker layouts going at full swing across the room. Clint Steele could have counted those of his friends present on the fingers of one hand.

"Look who's here, gents!" Sang out a harsh voice as Clint stepped aside from the door. The speaker was Curly Evans, one of the posse who had ridden with Shane tonight.

Evans' cry brought the eyes of the crowd around to him and then to the door, where his glance was directed. A stillness settled across the room. As if at a signal, the men standing between Clint Steele and Mike Crag's table stepped aside, leaving a lane clear before the bar.

Mike Crag rose ponderously from his chair, a towering, thick-set figure. His hard glance took in the ex-sheriff and a slow smile erased the tautness of his blocky face.

He drawled in a voice that carried clearly the length of the room: "Come here, Steele!"

Clint Steele advanced slowly along the crowded aisle that had opened to Crag's table. His spine tingled at the menace he faced in this unfriendly gathering. Even the prod of the gun rammed through his belt beneath his coat at his backbone failed to ease the conviction that he might not come through these next few minutes alive.

He stood finally facing Crag across the table, Shane in the chair to his left. McBride, his face scarred and swollen, sat at Crag's right. The stillness a moment ago had been oppressive. Now it was nearly unbearable as the crowd awaited Mike Crag's next word.

"The boys have been tellin' me you whined over the vote count," Crag said. "Still feel that way about it?"

Steele said, "Yes," soberly, looking Crag straight in the eye. For a moment Crag's face clouded in anger. Then, on sudden inspiration, he said, "Evans, go across to Judge Baker's and bring those ballots back here. Pick up three or four of Steele's side-kicks on the way. We'll have a recount, here and now!"

Evans had started toward the door when Clint Steele said flatly, "Hold on! I ain't questionin' the ballots. What I do question is how they were marked!"

BENEATH the floor, less than six feet from the spot where Steele stood, Red Lee heard his friend's drawled words and gathered his legs under him in a crouch. A moment ago he had lighted a match and discovered three pink ballots buried in the dust below the floor joists. Those ballots had each been marked with a cross after Clint Steele's name. Now, shoulders hunched up against the floor boards, Red waited for what was to happen above. His shoulders hugged the flooring in the middle of a foot-and-a-half rectangle edged with thin lines of light that shone through. That rectangle with the opening through which Sam Stacey had earlier reached up through the hinged door in the bottom of the ballot barrel to switch enough ballots marked for Clint Steele to throw the election to Jeff McBride.

Overhead, Mike Crag's deep-toned voice answered Clint's flat accusal: "Say that again, Steele!"

"You mean you want it plainer?" Steeel asked. "All right, you can have it! This afternoon Sam Stacey crawled under the floor here. He reached up through the—"

At that instant Red heard the scrape of a chair close by, the scuffle of boots, and knew that Clint Steele would never be allowed to finish what he'd started to say. As the realization came, his body surged upward against the floor opening. His right hand lifted his Colt from holster.

The flooring above gave an inch, then fell back again. Some heavy weight was holding it down. Red gathered all his strength in another upward surge. Slowly, the flooring rose against the pressure of his broad shoulders. Then the weight eased off the planks and he was rising up out of the floor to face a scene packed with violence.

The back end of the bar had been resting on the opening, hiding it. As Red stood erect, the long bar fell frontward, spilling glasses and bottles across the floor in a crash of breaking glass. A beer keg, unbunged, spouted its foamy liquid

upward toward the roof beams. Close to the left, Bill Shane was rising up out of his chair, gun half drawn, wheeling around on Clint Steele whose spare frame was moving violently in a sideward lunge.

Thought-quick, Red swiveled his gun around and thumbed one shot. His bullet caught Shane in the chest and drove the man backward in a broken sprawl over the back of his chair. McBride made a dive for the cover of the table as Clint's lunge halted abruptly. The sheriff reached back under his coat for his gun.

Mike Crag, momentarily surprised, now moved. His right hand lanced up under the lapel of his coat to an arm-pit holster. His move was lightning-fast, beating the arcing swing of Red's gun that came around at him.

As his hand moved, Crag raised a foot to the table edge and thrust it in a swift kick that turned it over on Red. When his gun slashed down from his coat, it was lined at Clint Steele.

RED had a fraction of a second before the table toppled over on him. He saw where Crag's shot was to go and knew that Clint hadn't yet had time to draw. He flicked his gun around and shot hurriedly. His bullet slammed into Crag whose arm jerked out of line. Then, as the table top blotted out his vision of Crag, Clint's gun roared in a prolonged burst of sound.

Red shoved the table aside with an outthrust hand. He saw Crag falling, his white shirt front splotched with crimson. Then he saw Jeff McBride, lacking the cover of the table, lining a gun on him. He laid his sights on McBride and his gun bucked against his wrist an instant before McBride's flashed powder flame that scorched the side of his face. He saw McBride slump face down to the floor, his gun spinning out of reach.

Up front a hoarse voice shouted, "Lift 'em, you sidewinders! Reach, or we'll blow you in two!"

The doorway filled with men carrying shotguns, men who lined up to each side of the room to cover the crowd. These men were Clint Steele's friends, mainly small ranchers, all of whom bore a grudge against Mike Crag. The threat of their guns immediately discouraged any rash desire the Forked Lightning crew standing before the overturned bar might have had for getting into the fight.

Red climbed up out of the hole through the floor to see Clint Steele standing spraddle-legged, holding the bloody sleeve of his right arm. The lawman saw the look of alarm that came to Red's face and drawled, "Nothin' but a scratch. Find anything down there?"

Red took the dusty ballots from his pocket and handed them across. A man beyond the three bodies sprawled on the floor stepped in and threw his coat over Mike Crag's battered face. Clint Steele's bullets had made it an ugly sight.

Later, in the sheriff's office, Clint told Red: "Funny, but this mornin' I was wishin' we were settlin' more than a sheriff's election today. As it comes out, we were. You stay on to run your outfit for the bank, I stay on to keep anyone else from gettin' the ideas Crag had. Could you want anything more?"

"Yeah," Red drawled. "How about passin' out some cigars?"

THE END.

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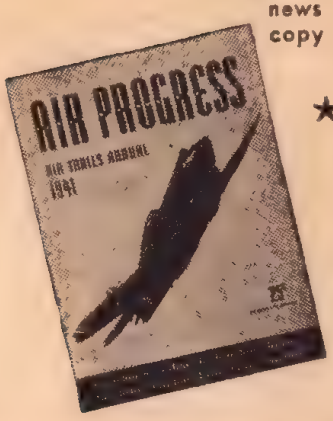

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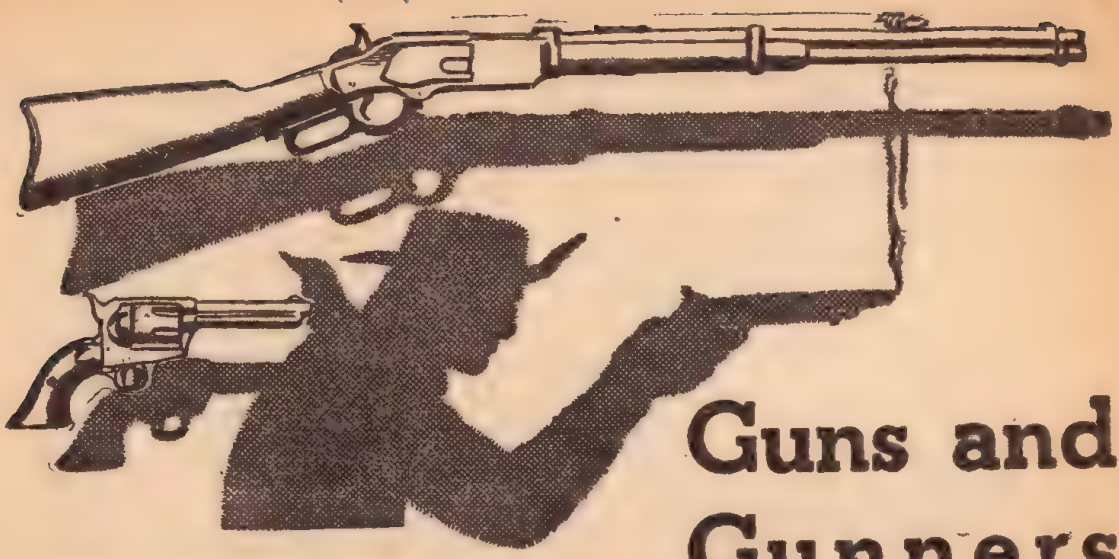


Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

Is it practical to hunt big game with hand guns? Is a rifle always necessary in the woods?

This question is easily answered. If you have suitable, powerful big-bore revolvers or automatic pistols, hand-gun hunting of big game is practical—if you can hit your game and the range is short.

Very few people are sufficiently skilled in the art of hand-gun shooting to depend upon the equipment available. Revolver bullets are by no means as powerful as the hunting rifle group, in that they either do not have enough weight or do not hit a hard-enough blow to kill quickly and cleanly. Hand-gun hunting is being revived today.

Generally speaking, the hand gun is used at hunting ranges of less than fifty yards. On rare occasions, hand guns will kill grizzly bear. About a year ago, a friend of mine took the .357 S. & W. Magnum revolver into Alaska on a big-game hunt. I saw on his return the skull of a grizzly that had been shot with the Magnum revolver. The bullet struck that grizzly between the eyes, penetrated the skull, ruptured the brain, and split the skull with a quarter-inch-wide crack almost its entire length.

Revolvers have often been used to hunt deer, bear, and smaller game. I know one chap who specializes in woodchuck hunting with revolvers. He uses the powerful Magnum side arm and stalks his game to within fifty yards. He gets more kick out of this than long-range shooting with a rifle and telescope sight.

If you must hunt with hand guns, by all means select one of sufficient

The following list of literature is available to our readers: STRAIGHT SHOOTING, SNAP SHOOTING, WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, SAVAGE, STEVENS, FOX, COLT, SMITH & WESSON, HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON, 3c each; MOSSBERG, MARLIN, 2c each; WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, 5c; REMINGTON ARMS AND AMMUNITION, 6c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c each and 38c west of Chicago. None can be sent to Canada. Postage stamps are accepted.

Application blanks for membership in the National Rifle Association may be obtained by writing to Mr. Sharpe. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp with your request.

power to do a fair and honest job on the game in question. Calibers I would definitely rule out are .32s, .32-20s, .32 automatics, and most .38 revolvers. Some guns chambered for the .38 Special are practical with the heavier loads. The .38 Colt automatic is also a practical arm, as is the .45 automatic.

Of the calibers best adapted for big-game hunting, the .357 S. & W. Magnum is by far the most powerful. In fact, this is the most powerful revolver cartridge in the world and far more powerful than any automatic pistol. This caliber is practically the same as the .38 Special. The cartridge is longer, and ordinary .38 Special revolvers cannot be rechambered to handle it.

Besides the .357 Magnum, other very excellent hunting cartridges are the .44 S. & W. Special, the .44/40, the .45 Colt, and either revolvers or automatic pistols chambered to handle the .45 automatic cartridge. Of the group, the .45 Colt is probably the best, but the .44 Special is most accurate, and nearly equal in power. The .44-40 ranks very close to the .45.

In choosing a hand gun for hunting purposes, always select a heavy-framed gun. Then pick a suitable holster, which will permit you to get it out and in action with a minimum of delay. This holster should never be the flap type, but of the open-type variety, custom built to fit your particular gun.

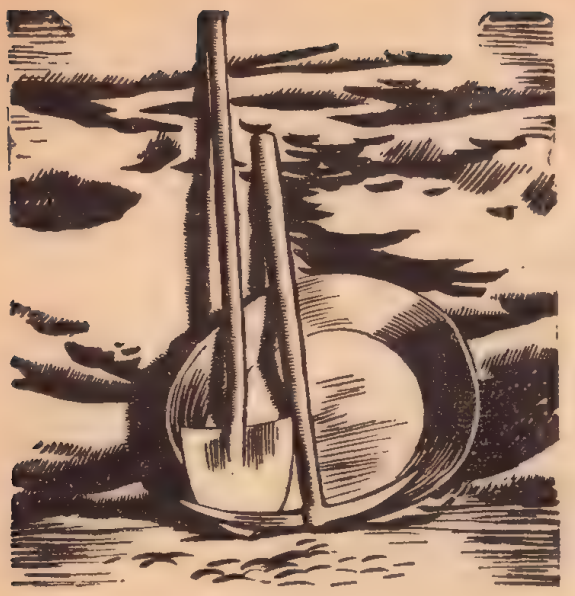
Preferably, a hunting gun should be equipped with target sights. More accurate shooting can be done with this type of sight, and accuracy is a prime requisite. You should learn the anatomy of your game and determine all vital areas, particularly those which will permit the quickest and cleanest kills.

The .357 Magnum will also shoot the .38 Special revolver cartridge. Many hunters using this type of gun shoot the .30 Special Mid-range Wadcutter, strictly a target type of cartridge with a flat-nosed bullet seated flush with the mouth of the cartridge case. This load they reserve exclusively for very small game. Woodchuck and other small animals, including game birds, are killed quickly and cleanly with this medium-power, flat-nosed slug. It does not seem to destroy meat excessively, yet the shock will drop the game instantly. For larger game, the full-charge load is used.

The .45 Colt automatic and the .38 Super automatic are made exclusively by Colt. The .44 Special, the .44-40, and .45 revolvers are made by both Colt and Smith & Wesson. The .357 Magnum cartridge was designed for the Smith & Wesson revolver of that name. However, several of their guns are chambered to handle it.

Hunting with a hand gun has advantages and disadvantages. In the latter group, it requires an extra good shot, skilled in the art of revolver or pistol shooting. Also, hand guns do not have the power of modern hunting rifles. Listed among advantages, however, is the fact that the hunter always has both hands free to assist him in climbing over obstructions or in carrying his game after he has shot it.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE use of ultra-violet light in prospecting is fast becoming a new and important tool in the hands of the modern metal hunter. Particularly in connection with the intensified search now being carried on throughout the Western mining country, for sheelite, one of the main ore minerals of the much-needed metal, tungsten.

At times identification of sheelite from its appearance and physical characteristics alone may be difficult. It is in such cases that rays from the ultra-violet lamp have proven their usefulness. By producing a fluorescent glow peculiar to the mineral they afford a positive test for this valuable source of metallic tungsten.

W. B., of Flint, Michigan, has asked us about sheelite and these ultra-violet ray tests this week. The subject is both interesting and timely with so many prospectors in the field nowadays keeping a sharp lookout for tungsten deposits that may be developable into mining properties of considerable commercial value.

Ordinarily when in the mass sheelite can be distinguished by its high specific gravity (it is very heavy to the feel), its distinctive greasy luster and the fact that it can easily be scratched by a good knife and its scratch mark is *always* white. When found in placer gravels, like gold for instance, nuggets and particles of sheelite can be panned. The mineral is "heavy" enough to hang back in the pan almost as gold particles do. Vein material suspected of containing sheelite in smaller grains but still sufficiently rich in tungsten to constitute an ore should be crushed in a hand mortar and a small sample of the powdered rock panned. If sheelite is present it will hang back as a white concentrate.

Color is frequently one of the most readily recognizable, distinguishing characteristics of a mineral. In the case of sheelite, attempting to identify it by color may cause confusion because the mineral may be snowy white, or almost black. It may have a definite pale-yellow tint, or be pink, or occur in various shades of brown from light sandy to cinnamon. Therefore often when sheelite occurs in small grains in an ore or vein matrix and there is doubt as to whether the grains are tungsten, nothing will settle the question as readily and as positively as an ultra-violet lamp.

Several types of these lamps are now made for the use of prospectors and mining men. They are made to operate on a regular power circuit, or for field work from either wet or dry storage batteries.

When ultra-violet light of the proper wave length is focused on certain minerals it causes them to glow with a color band peculiar and dis-

tinct to that particular mineral. Thus under ultra-violet light even small particles of sheelite will show up regardless of how complex the ore is, or of the color of the sheelite in the rock being examined.

However other ores of tungsten such as wolframite, a combination of tungsten, iron and manganese, and ferberite, a tungsten and iron mineral, do not react to this test. They are not fluorescent, and fail to give any characteristic responsive glow under the ultra-violet rays. Though the test is applicable only to sheelite among the tungsten ores, this drawback is really quite negligible. From a commercial tungsten-producing standpoint, sheelite is by far the most important tungsten ore found in the west and the one most tungsten prospectors search for.

Ultra-violet tests are most successfully made if as much outside light as possible is excluded. For examining surface-vein showings or outcrops an old-fashioned photographer's black cloth thrown over the head is a useful light excluder. A camp blanket will do.

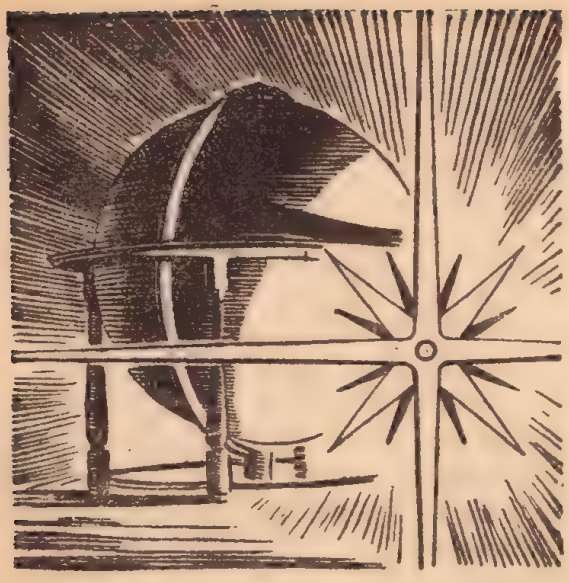
Because the tests are more satisfactory in the dark the new phenomenon of night prospecting with ultra-violet lamps has been observed in some of the Western sheelite areas. The lamps in such cases are usually powered by small gasoline-driven generators, and fitted with long extension cords up to one hundred and fifty feet in length. So used, the lamps have been successful in examining extensive surface-vein showings of likely ore. When the fluorescent glow of sheelite demonstrated favorable areas they were marked with a splash of bright paint so that they could be more easily identified in morning daylight for more accurate sampling and assaying.

One caution that must be remembered in connection with ultra-violet light examination of sheelite areas is that even a thin film of iron oxide, mud or other extraneous material coating the mineral will effectively screen out the ultra-violet rays and thus prevent the fluorescent glow reaction. Another is that the operator must be very careful not to look directly at the lamp. Its injurious effect on the eyes is about the same as that of the arc produced by an electric welding outfit.

Diving for gold is not, as G. S., of East St. Louis, Illinois, seems to think, a wild daydream. It is an actual possibility. In fact it is being done along the bed of the Tuolumne River in California where a diver working the river bottom for gold directs the suction nozzle of a gravel pump operated from a floating barge on the surface. The sucked-up gravel is washed and the gold recovered by equipment also housed on the barge. Moreover excellent returns are reported from this particular and novel method of underwater placer mining. The truth, G. S., is sometimes a whole lot stranger than fiction—especially in the mining game.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

WINTER clothing for the cold-weather camper and year-around outdoorsman is the timely subject brought up by H. R., of Trenton, New Jersey, this week.

"What," he writes, "are the best types of clothing for outdoor wear in really cold climates where the thermometer drops to zero, and sometimes stays there? I mean what do trappers, prospectors, hunters and such men wear during the winter months in places like Alaska or northern Canada? Would these be suitable for an outdoor winter in northern United States, say Idaho or Montana?"

Garments for cold-weather outdoor wear, H. R., should have several essential qualities. They must provide warmth of course, which is done by insulating the natural body heat so that it doesn't escape, plus protection of the body against penetration by the outdoor cold. Besides affording warmth the clothing should be serviceable. It should be able to withstand rough usage, and offer the maximum general utility. The latter means that the type of clothing chosen should be suited to the kind of outdoor winter occupation you have in mind.

The man going ice fishing and planning to sit in a windbreak shelter beside a hole cut in some frozen lake surface can bundle up with a weight of clothes that would only be a chill, sweat-producing burden to a person more actively engaged. Bundlesome clothes, even in below-zero weather are anathema to the active outdoorsman such as a trapper who must perforce spend most of his days tramping the white-blanketed woods on snowshoes, covering a long trap line.

The best winter garments for cold weather are primarily the same regardless of geography. It is the prevailing temperatures, not the location that demands them.

Starting from the skin out a good suit of lightweight, pure woolen underwear is the best bet for all-around warmth, service and utility. The two-piece type is more practical for winter wilderness wear than a union suit, and more comfortable. Good woolen socks are another virtual must item. In really cold weather two pairs can be worn, a lighter pair first and over that a heavy pair of calf-length woolen hose.

When it comes to trousers, or breeches (If the former are chosen, the cuffs should be tucked inside the socks) the regular army, olive-tan wool ones are good. So are the Mackinaw cloth ones. Both are warm and silent in the woods which makes them adaptable for stalking game on hunting trips. They are,

however, fairly heavy and in rough going will catch every bur, and snag on every briar. For a tough all-season proposition nothing will stand up like genuine English moleskin, a strong twilled cotton cloth that wears like iron, is windproof, dries quickly if it has been wet, and feels comfortable to wear. Lumbermen in the Northwest frequently favor a trouser material known as Kersey cloth. It has good wearing qualities, and stands up well in a cold, rainy climate.

Shun corduroy for cold weather winter camp wear. It tears at the drop of a hat, is heavy for the warmth it provides, and the noise it makes as the legs rub together in walking will startle game.

A good, full-cut pure woolen shirt is best. Be sure the pockets have button flaps over them. The regular army woolen service shirt is less expensive than other types and will also give good wear.

Short Mackinaws, either jacket or jumper type, are about the most practical zero weather outer covering. They are popular with northern woodsmen. Get them "roomy." A size too large is better than a size too small. Leather jackets are good for keeping out the wind, but are cold and clammy if they get wet.

In really bitter-cold climates the Eskimo parka is hard to beat. It is light, windproof, and warm. For service we mean one of the plain ones, short, just a little longer than jacket length, and made of some closely woven, smooth-surfaced, wind-breaking cotton material such as blue denim, or better still, moleskin. They have a drawstring under the chin and a fur-fringed hood that can be pulled up over the head. And though they bear very little resemblance to the ornate, tassel-ornamented, knee-length, fur-skin parkas usually seen in pictures of Arctic explorers, or in movies of the Far North, they are more serviceable.

Woolen Mackinaw caps with ear flaps, or a knitted woolen cap will keep your head warm. Mittens are warmer than gloves. Good mittens pulled on over a pair of knitted, pure woolen gloves will keep your hands warm in any weather.

For cold-weather footgear, particularly where wet snow and slush are prevalent, waterproofed "shoepacs" are excellent. Get the kind with a stout, rubber-soled rubber base on which leather uppers are sewn. The uppers should be about half calf-high. Get them big enough to accommodate your double pair of wool socks. Have the "pacs" fit neither too loosely, nor too tightly over them. If the shoes are too loose they will be uncomfortable. If they are too tight, they will cramp foot circulation, your feet will get cold and in real bitter weather there may be danger of frostbite.

To T. D., of Chester, Pennsylvania, who asks another cold-weather "equipment" question: Enamel- and graniteware cooking utensils have a tendency to chip and flake badly during winter camping-out trips.

● .We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

Those of you who have been corresponding with Mrs. Healy of 139 Washington Street, Hyde Park, Massachusetts, will be grieved to learn of her recent death. We have just received a note from her son Charles telling us this sad news and we know we are joined by all the members of the Hollow Tree, far and near, in extending to him our heartfelt sympathies.

Margarita likes active sports—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am fifteen years old and am writing this plea for Pen Pals between fifteen and nineteen years of age. My hobbies are collecting souvenirs and photographs. My favorite sports are swimming, riding, tennis, sailing and shooting, and I like to dance. Write soon, everyone.—Margarita Lawton, Lavalle 676, Hurlingham, F. C. P., Republic Argentina, South America

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The army is represented this week—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you room for a lonesome soldier in the Hollow Tree? I am nineteen years old, like to dance, and skating and swimming are my favorite sports. I will exchange photographs with everyone who answers this request, so come on, gals and boys, and sling a little ink my way.—Claude Arnold, Company C, 67th Armored Regiment, Fort Benning, Georgia

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Felecia will swap photos—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a constant reader of your column in Western Story magazine and would like you to publish this request. I am a seventeen-year-old girl and would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world. I am a great lover of the outdoors and my favorite sports are basketball, swimming, hiking, skating and sailing. My hobbies are collecting stamps, writing letters and learning about people's interests. I will exchange photographs with all who write, so let me hear from you.—Felecia Hobek, 1502—43rd Street, North Bergen, New Jersey

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Harold is a good sport—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a faithful reader of Western Story and would like to join the Hollow Tree. I am a Georgia boy seventeen years old and am a very good sport. I would like to have lots of Pen Pals and promise to answer all letters. I will exchange snapshots with anyone who wishes, so please print my plea in Western Story.—Harold James, Route No. 1, Doraville, Georgia

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Write Catharine lots of cheery letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a seventeen-year-old girl who is sick in bed and can't get outdoors, so I would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world. The sports I am most interested in are baseball and basketball. I get so lonesome lying here in bed and think collecting Pen Pals would be a wonderful pastime, so I am asking a special favor of the young people that they write to me. I will gladly answer all letters.—Catharine Simmons, Route No. 1, Crabbottom, Virginia

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Eddy will answer pronto—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to join the Hollow Tree gang of Pen Pals. I am seventeen years old and am interested in horse racing, stamp collecting and all outdoor sports. All letters will be answered without delay.—Eddy Leggett, 325 Elizabeth Street, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

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May Belle wants to hear from artists—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would appreciate it very much if you would print my letter in the Hollow Tree. I am eighteen years old, a senior in high school, and I

like sports, especially bicycling and roller skating, and also enjoy the movies. I should especially enjoy letters from people who like to draw, as I sometimes attempt a little cartooning. I'd like to exchange snapshots, too. Won't everyone please write to me? I will answer every letter I receive.—May Belle Cloister, General Delivery, Carthage, Missouri

Dan enjoys writing letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a young man seventeen years old who enjoys sending and receiving letters. I enjoy all sports, hunting, fishing and camping. Going to the movies and doing crossword puzzles are also favorite pastimes of mine. I would like to hear from fellows and girls from any part of the country and I'll gladly exchange photos with anyone who wishes to do so. So, come on, Pals, and write to me.—Dan Halligan, 509 Broadway, Troy, New York

Verna Mae is sweet sixteen—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like very much to correspond with boys and girls from all corners of the world. I am sixteen years old, live in town and like to write letters. I enjoy all sports and would like to hear from boys and girls between sixteen and twenty-five, but all are welcome.—Verna Mae Marvin, 210 South York Avenue, Oberlin, Kansas

Swing fans heed this call—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Will you enter this plea for Pen Pals from an aircraft worker? I am twenty-one years old and would particularly like to hear from girls and boys who are interested in swing music or who collect phonograph records, which is my hobby. I also enjoy swimming, playing water polo and collecting pictures. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with all who wish. —Warren McGill, 1669 Linwood Street, San Diego, California

Don't let Rosemary down—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I asked my godmother where I might find a Pen Pal and she told me to send my request to the Hollow Tree, and so that is what I am doing. Won't someone, somewhere in the United States or any other country prove that she advised me correctly? It would be a shame to ruin her faith in Western Story magazine, don't you think? If you are interested in hearing more about my godmother and myself just drop me a line.—Rosemary Sarber, Belmond, Iowa

Here's a generous offer—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am an old traveler, trader and trapper who has spent over twenty years in the far North of Canada, and I have plenty of time on my mink ranch and plenty of ink and paper to answer all nice letters I receive from young or old of either sex, but more particularly those old fellows and girls who are alone and neglected. To them, perhaps, I could bring a little cheer into an otherwise drab existence.—J. E. Smith, Conklin, Alberta, Canada

Patricia is a W. S. fan—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been a constant reader of Western Story magazine, but this is my first attempt to get some Pen Pals. I would like to hear from folks from all over the world, so come on, pals, and write me some letters.—Patricia Randall, 2548 Edison Avenue, Jacksonville, Florida

Be sure you answer this letter—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am twenty-one years of age and hail from Mississippi. I joined the U. S. marines last August after my mother died and at present am in the telephone school at the marine base in San Diego, California. I'll travel lots before I get out of here, and would like to have lots of friends write to me. The people I like to write and talk to best are middle-aged people. I seem to get along with them better. I can't remember my grandparents, so I'd like mighty well to write to some old people who are lonesome and cheer them up as well as myself. I'll answer all letters from young people, though, and exchange snapshots. I have a camera, and my hobby is photography.—Private Earl Rish, Marine Corps Base, Signal Detachment, San Diego, California

Fill Grace's mailbox—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a fourteen-year-old girl living in a small town on the New England coast. I enjoy dancing and like most all sports and would like to hear from boys and girls the world over. So, come on, letter fans, and fill my mailbox chuck full.—Grace Beckwith, State Street, Guilford, Connecticut

John wants to lasso some friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been a reader of Western Story for many years and have read many interesting letters in the Hollow Tree, and now I am throwing my rope for Pen Pals from sea to sea. I am a CCC enrollee who is interested in dancing, hunting, photography and music, and I promise to exchange snapshots and answer all letters. I am twenty-two years old.—John Thack, Co. 4601-DG-118, Camp Twin Bridges, Elko, Nevada

Marie is a gal of few words—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Please put my name in Western Story magazine for Pen Pals. My hobbies are collecting stamps and pictures of friends. My favorite sports are skating and skiing.—Marie Carrig, 312 Dorf Street, Herkimer, New York

From an Indiana farm comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Is there any room in the Hollow Tree for a Hoosier boy? I am eighteen years old and enjoy writing letters. My favorite sports are baseball and basketball, and I enjoy good movies. As a hobby I collect book matches and cigarettes. Please, everyone, answer this farm boy's plea for Pen Pals.—A. Gerald Kado, R. R. No. 2, North Judson, Indiana

Mrs. Heck knows how to fill empty days—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have collected some mighty fine Pen Pals through the Hollow Tree, but would like a few new ones. I am in my early thirties and a family woman. I used to wonder how folks could be lonely with a bunch of little ones to look after, but mine are all in school now and I quite understand. Since I have all day to myself, I go to the movies quite a bit, and my hobbies are collecting hankies, quilt patterns and photos. For exercise, I like to hike miles and miles, rain or shine. I would like to receive many letters from the West and everywhere else, and age doesn't make any difference to me—young or old are very welcome. Mrs. Dorothy Heck, 1448 Roberts E., Hazel Park, Michigan

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Eino has the right idea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Have you room in your Hollow Tree for an eighteen-year-old lumberjack who hails from the wood-covered highlands and valleys of northern Ontario? How about it, friends across the border, will you allow this woods lover to share with you his pleasures and thrills in nature, camp lore, hunting, fishing and photography? While the snow falls thick and fast and the long and lonely evenings are whiled away, I shall be awaiting your invitation for a long and pleasant friendship. If possible, inclose a snap of yourself and you will receive one from your future Pal.—Eino Jarvi, Wabos., A. C. R., Ontario, Canada

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Answer this S O S—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sailor in the United States navy and would like to join the Hollow Tree. I am twenty-five years old and would enjoy corresponding with people from all parts of the world. My favorite pastimes are fishing, swimming and writing letters, so come one, come all and fill my box with letters.—C. E. Sherrow, Box 113, U. S. Submarine Base, Coco Solo, Canal Zone

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And here's a "sister act"—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Why not send some letters this way to two lonely sisters in the heart of the Rockies? Our interests include most everything. For amusements we like skating and dancing and outdoor sports of all kinds. We have several hobbies and would like to receive letters from boys and girls all over the world between fifteen and twenty-one years of age. Pearl is seventeen years old, and Vada Dee is fifteen. We will exchange snapshots and souvenirs.—Vada Dee and Pearl Hawkins, 534 North Third Street, Montrose, Colorado

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Lewis sounds like a right smart lad—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May a thirteen-year-old boy looking for Pen Pals edge his way into the Hollow Tree? I play the trumpet and the drums. My hobbies are photography and collecting snapshots and souvenirs from all over the world. To the first five who write I promise a souvenir, and to those who come after that a picture of myself in exchange for one of theirs. I will answer everyone between the ages of twelve and fourteen.—Lewis Heggi, 1813 N. Reese Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

From the Wild-'n'-woolly West comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a sixteen-year-old girl and will write to anyone between the ages of fifteen and twenty. I play the piano and my favorite sports are horseback riding and swimming. I also love to dance. Come on, all you guys and gals, and write to me pronto.—Martha Newton, 1415 N. 2nd Street, Phoenix, Arizona

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This pal will tell you about his travels—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Please put my plea for Pen Pals in print. I am in the navy and have had many ports of call. I would like to tell anyone who is interested about the places I have seen in my travels around the world. Photography and collecting news articles are my hobbies. Pen Pals of all ages are welcome, and I'll answer every letter faithfully.—E. D. Edwards, U. S. S. *Melville*, c/o Postmaster, New York City, New York

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Phyllis needs cheering up—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a small-town girl fourteen years old, wishing for Pen Pals. I like all sports, especially swimming, and love all kinds of music. I also have a stamp collection and will exchange snapshots with anyone who writes to me. Will answer all letters, so come on and write to a lonesome girl.—Phyllis Rohrer, Box 35, Huntington, Oregon

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Margaret will answer everyone gladly—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May a lonesome nurse join the Hollow Tree? I am thirty-seven years old and any Pals no matter what age or sex will find me happy to answer their letters. My weakness is bowling, and I also enjoy dancing. Here's hoping my mailbox will not stay empty long.—Margaret Garrett, 501 Tennessee Avenue, N. E., Washington, D. C.

This is Sam's second try—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is the second time I have sent in a request to the Hollow Tree, and I sure hope this time I see it in print. I am a young man twenty-three years old and my favorite pastimes are dancing, singing, reading, writing letters and going to the movies, and my favorite sports are boxing, ice skating and baseball. I'd like to hear from orchestra leaders, singers, and anyone who wishes to help fill my mailbox is welcome, no matter where they live.—Sam De Mateo, 704 South Racine Avenue, Chicago, Illinois

---

Souvenirs exchanged here—

Dear Miss Rivers:

This is New York calling all other States. I sincerely want some Pen Pals and will promise prompt replies to everyone who answers this request. I will exchange snapshots, picture post cards and souvenirs, so come on, everyone, far and near—please don't disappoint me.—Mrs. G. R. Howell, 139 Spruce Avenue, Rochester, New York

Part Three

TRAIL of the Thundering Herds

BY BENNETT FOSTER

The Story So Far:

Rusty Shotridge, a young cowpuncher, rides to San Ysidor where he expects to get a job with the herd Colonel Watrous is sending up the trail to Dodge City.

Watrous is glad to give Rusty the promised job, but his partner, Leonard Carlisle, a wealthy Easterner, takes a dislike to the young puncher. Offered another job, Rusty decides to leave the Watrous crew and Carlisle mockingly suggests that he is afraid to go up the trail. Rusty immediately counters by saying he'll go if Carlisle will, too. Carlisle accepts the challenge despite the strong objections offered by his sister, Colonel Watrous and Scott McBride, the trail driver of the herd.

McBride hurries to Slippery Smith, who is also due to take a herd up the trail, to tell him of this complication; he and Smith have a deal underway to steal some of the Watrous cattle. They decide to cut a third man, Honey Yates, in on the proposed swindle, on condition that he "take care" of Rusty Shotridge.

Yates makes an attempt to dry-gulch Rusty in town, but fails, and shortly after the Watrous herd gets underway.

From the start, Rusty is aware of tension and his suspicion is aroused when McBride decides to earmark the herd instead of taking time to have it branded. With the exception of Rusty, Leonard Carlisle and two old Watrous hands, McBride has gathered together a crew of hardcases, including Honey Yates.

The drive goes along smoothly until the herd crosses the Red River into the Na-

tions, wild, dangerous country where there is no law. The weather changes and one night when the herd is bedded down, a storm breaks and the herd stampedes.

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH OF A TRAIL BOSS

It was every man for himself and the cattle. That was the rule. The cattle first, then the individual. Rusty mounted Toughy and started, and all about him Watrous riders hit their night horses and pulled out. For a little time there were shouts that rang in Rusty's ears. Then, as Toughy really got down to work, he split off. He knew the direction of the run and his ears told him that he was closing in. At last, through the night, he could see the bulk of the cattle. But this was only for an instant, for as though some celestial hand had dumped a gigantic bucket, the rain came, torrents of it, closing down, shutting Rusty and his horse within a curtained space through which they moved at a mad run and which always accompanied them.

Ordinarily in a run the riders would bunch on one point of the cattle and make a concerted effort to turn them. By so doing, they could cause a mill in the endless circle by which all the run would shortly be taken out of the steers. But with rain and invisibility this was impossible. Rusty, clinging to the flank of the herd, knew that it was splitting. They were in no recognized trail which the steers might blindly and instinctively follow. The idea was, as Rusty saw it, to stay with what he could. If the cattle split up, then he would be with a bunch, could eventually turn and hold them when they grew tired, and so keep at least a portion of the herd together.

As the rain came the lightning ceased. Generally lightning stays on the outskirts of a storm, at its front, along the sides, in the rear. The center, where heavy rain occurs, rarely carries electricity. It was pitch black, there were running cattle to his left and Rusty thanked his fortune for Toughy, big and mean but honest and sure footed. Once the horse stumbled but recovered. Once they slid down a bank and scrambled up the other side. Rusty made no attempt at guidance. He had to trust Toughy and he had to stay with him.

The pace slowed. The rain lessened. Presently the cattle were only trotting. It was then that Rusty made his move. With the thinning of the rain he could see a little and he put Toughy ahead, trying to reach the point of the steers. He gained that position and made his try. Yelling, shooting in front of the cattle, he swung down on the leaders.

More than an hour had gone by since he had jumped from his blankets. The steers were tired but they trotted steadily, apparently with no destination but only the fixed idea of getting away from the thing that had frightened them. The rain had thinned now so that it was no longer a curtain but rather a steady, methodical downpour. And too, light was coming. Rusty had come off guard at two o'clock. He had spent nearly an hour in camp. He had been with the running cattle for more than an hour. It was nearing four o'clock and, save for the rain and overhanging clouds, daylight would have come. Now there was light enough to see.

Rusty, surveying the steers, discovered that he had a little bunch of about two hundred head. Where the others were he did not know

and could not immediately ascertain. His own bunch was his immediate concern and so, as he crowded Toughy down on the leaders, as he popped the cartridges in his six-shooter, as he yelled and shouted, he did not worry about the rest of the cattle or the crew. The leaders, under Rusty's coercion, turned a trifle. He redoubled his efforts. The lead steers swung to the left, turned, swung farther and, presently, came against the drags and followed them. Rusty had his mill made. Pulling Toughy back he watched, alert to check any steer that might try to escape from the endless chain.

GRADUALLY the pace of the cattle slowed and became a walk and finally the walk slowed. The mill shifted slightly, the ground sloping and the cattle following the slope. Then the movement ceased entirely and Rusty pushed back his sopping hat and wiped water from his forehead and face. His bunch had stopped. He wondered about the rest now.

Seeking a vantage point for observation, Rusty left his charges and rode back toward the high ground. As he rode he looked down. He could hardly see his horse's feet. He could not, after he had ridden two hundred yards, see the steers at all. The clouds hung lowering, reaching down to the earth. Fog was all about, blanketing the ground, cutting off vision. Trying to spy out the country would be useless. Rusty could easily lose the cattle he had held.

He turned and rode back, quick relief welling up in him as, coming down the slope, he came under the fog and could see the bulk of his steers looming through the mist. He rode around them. They were spread out slightly, grazing on the wet grass as peacefully as though they had never run, as though they had never been panic stricken. The rain had ceased.

Rusty stopped his horse. Toughy was weary, bone tired. At the moment Rusty was mighty sorry for the animal. Tired as Toughy was, he could not rest. Rusty must hold the steers together or they would be lost in the fog. And so he stirred Toughy again and rode once more upon his slow circle. When the fog lifted, when the weather cleared, he would find the wagon and the outfit. He completed the circle, began on another, then pulled Toughy to a sudden halt. There was someone coming through the fog, a rider. Rusty called and the dim figure came toward him. Rusty peered through the mist, staring to make certain.

"Carlisle," he called. "This way, Carlisle!"

The figure turned slightly from his course and came on. Wearily the horse stopped. Rusty looked at the rider and Leonard Carlisle returned that look, his eyes blank and uncomprehending.

"Where's the rest of 'em, Carlisle?" Rusty demanded. "Do you know where the rest are? Where's the wagon?"

Still the blank stare from uncomprehending eyes. At last Leonard Carlisle spoke slowly, his voice thick with horror. "I was right beside him," he mumbled. "I heard him."

"Beside who?" Rusty said sharply. "Who did you hear, Carlisle?"

"I was beside McBride," Carlisle replied, his words coming with an effort. "Right beside him. I could have touched him. I saw him go down and I heard his scream. I . . . I—" He covered his haggard face with his hands, and his horse—for

companionship—took a step forward and stopped close by Toughy.

Rusty's own eyes were wide with reflected horror. He knew what Carlisle had heard, knew the thing he had seen, could picture it: The black bulk of fluidly running cattle. The rumble of their hoofs, the rattle of clashing horns, and the steadying presence of a rider beside him, of a man who was along. And then the sudden drop, the blotting out of that man alongside, and a rising scream that never reached a peak, that never finished but was lost in the thunder of pounding hoofs, cut short by them.

"Steady," Rusty commanded, his own voice a little shaken. "Steady, Carlisle. Maybe he isn't gone. Maybe you just lost him."

"I heard him scream and I saw him go down," Carlisle repeated, shakenly. "I—" He stopped. There was a brief silence and then Rusty Shotridge spoke the epitaph of the trail.

"That was the chance he took. Tough luck."

Somehow there was a bond between these two men at the moment. Rusty did not like Leonard Carlisle. He thought him a pompous, conceited young prig who could not hold his own on a man's job. Carlisle, for his part, hated Rusty Shotridge with all his heart. Rusty was just about everything that Carlisle would have liked to be and could not be: competent, ready, free of speech and action. And too, Carlisle had seen Ellen Watrous kiss Rusty as they stood on the front porch of the Stockman Hotel in San Ysidor. That recollection rankled, for Leonard Carlisle was in love with Ellen. And yet the tragedy that Carlisle had witnessed but a few hours before, the need for companionship that both riders felt, bound them momentarily.

"What will we do now?" Carlisle asked finally.

"Wait till the fog burns off an' find the outfit," Rusty answered. "The steers ran north. The wagon and remuda are some place south of us."

"But they're scattered." Carlisle was awakening to the fact that his investment was in danger. "They—"

"There's men an' horses aplenty," Rusty interrupted curtly. "We'll gather cattle an' make a count. I wonder whose outfit it was that ran into us. They sure come a-hellin'."

"I don't know," Carlisle said. "The fog's thinning. I'll ride up and take a look around."

"All right," Rusty agreed, and turned his horse to climb the slope.

As they rode side by side Carlisle spoke once more. "What will we do now?" he asked, more to himself than to his companion. "If McBride's dead, what will we do?"

Rusty glanced at Carlisle from the corners of his eyes. For the first time in his life, Rusty judged, Leonard Carlisle was directly up against something, directly confronted with a question that he himself had to answer. Rusty presented that fact to him.

"That," he said, and there was grim satisfaction in his voice, "will be up to you, Carlisle. You're the owner of the steers. You an' Watrous."

WHEN they reached the higher ground Rusty could see that the fog was moving, rolled by a wind, and in the east from whence the storm had come there was a breaking of the clouds. Looking back down the slope, Rusty could see the steers he had held, and not far to the west there was another little

bunch of cattle. Rusty pointed to them.

"We've got to work back west," he said, forgetting that he had just placed responsibility with Carlisle. "The wagon's some place west an' south of us. We've got to have fresh horses an' work out all this country. We can throw our bunch with those other cattle."

Carlisle made no comment or suggestion but turned when Rusty turned and, with him, rode back to the steers once more. Both the cattle and the horses were tired. It was a chore to gather the steers and string them out toward the west. By the time this task was accomplished and the cattle finally moved, the sun was shining through.

When the two riders finally reached the bunch of cattle that Rusty had seen, they found the steers were not a part of the Watrous herd. There was more than one brand in the little bunch, but for the greater part they were trail-branded with a hackamore mark run across the nose.

"These aren't our cattle," Carlisle said sharply as the two small herds joined. "We should have kept ours by themselves."

Rusty grunted. "These belong to the outfit that ran into us last night," he said. "It doesn't make any difference who they belong to. We'll have to throw everything we can gather into one bunch an' work the herd. The other outfit will be doin' the same thing."

Perforce Carlisle contented himself with that. Rusty looked at the cattle. "I don't like to leave 'em," he stated. "We got anyhow three hundred head here. I don't like to ride off an' let 'em go, but we've got to find the wagon an' get fresh horses."

Carlisle looked at the cattle and then at his companion. "I'll stay here," he volunteered. "You go on. I—" He stopped. He had been about to admit that he could not find the wagon, that if he left the cattle he would be lost. Rusty sensed that. His courtesy made him give Carlisle an excuse.

"Mebbe that would be the best thing," Rusty agreed. "My horse is some fresher than yours."

It was not true. Toughy was exhausted, using his last reservoir of strength, and Carlisle's horse, in comparison, was fresh. Still Rusty gave Carlisle that graceful way out.

"I'll be back as soon as I can get here," he said, and nodding to Carlisle, rode away toward the southwest.

Within three miles he found the wagon. Deems and Telesfor had moved it. With daybreak Deems

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and Telesfor, knowing that their presence was necessary, had loaded the wagon, brought up the remuda, and come on. Deems had a fire built and Telesfor had the remuda close by. Nugget and Benbow were also at the wagon. They hailed Rusty as he came up, demanding news.

Rusty had news only of Carlisle and McBride. He retailed his knowledge, telling the Watrous men what Carlisle had said of the wagon boss. Deems shook his head when he heard that word, and Nugget, his old face drawn and seamed with weariness, growled a curse.

"We got to find him," Nugget announced.

To that Rusty agreed. Deems had coffee on the fire and each of the men refreshed himself with a cup of the hot liquid.

"I've got to take a fresh horse out to Carlisle," Rusty announced, "an' pilot him to the wagon. We got about three hundred head together, some of ours an' some of the other outfit's. They're trail-branded with a hackamore."

"Slippery Smith's outfit," Deems growled. "Blast him! His herd run right into ours an' started them. They was holdin' all right till that happened."

Rusty shrugged. Recriminations were of no use now. "I'll send Carlisle in," he announced. "I guess we'll all have to look for McBride but I'll shove what cattle we got back this way."

Nugget nodded. "We—" he began, and stopped. There was another rider coming toward the wagon, approaching from the south. "Here's Yates," Nugget said.

Honey Yates came on in, dismounted and let his weary horse stand. Walking up to the others, he looked at them, his smooth face impassive.

"What is it, Yates?" Nugget demanded.

"We found McBride," Yates answered slowly. "That was Slippery Smith's outfit that ran into us last night. They're movin' along this way. McBride's in their wagon."

"Is he—" Deems began.

"Squashed to a pulp," Yates completed the unfinished question. "They all run over him, I guess. Where's Carlisle?"

"Out with a bunch of cattle," Rusty answered. "I'm goin' to take a fresh horse out to him now."

Yates nodded. "Get him in," he directed. "Benbow, you go with Shotridge an' help him shove what cattle he's got this way. We're goin' to have to bury McBride an' build a roundup."

Rusty, looking at Yates, wondered if the man was as calloused as he sounded. No matter. Yates had spoken the truth. Without reply Rusty moved toward his horse. He would change horses and take a fresh mount out to Carlisle.

"Take one of McBride's horses, Shotridge," Yates called after him. "That string of yores is no good an' McBride won't be usin' his."

SADDLE changed over to his fresh horse, another horse in tow on a lead rope, Rusty started east again. Benbow, also freshly mounted, went with him. There was no conversation between the two men, no word spoken until they reached Carlisle. There Rusty reported briefly the knowledge that Yates had given him. He held the fresh horse while Carlisle changed his saddle, put the lead rope on Carlisle's weary mount, and pointed.

"The wagon is down below that ridge," he directed. "Just by a little motte of live oak. You can't miss it."

Carlisle nodded, swung up into his saddle and, leading his tired night horse, started ahead.

Rusty looked at Benbow and nodded toward the bunch of cattle. "Might as well start these in," he said.

The steers were reluctant to move. Rusty and Benbow worked at their task. They got their cattle started, kept them moving slowly and, coming to the ridge that Rusty had pointed out to Carlisle, saw that already a little congregation of cattle was collected below it. Some distance from the herd the wagons were camped, two of them close together and with one fire. Evidently Slippery Smith's outfit had come up during Rusty's absence. With Benbow's help Rusty shoved his gather down the slope of the ridge and dropped them with the other cattle; then he and Benbow went to camp.

All the Watrous crew was in. There were strangers too, gathered about the fire and Rusty saw Carlisle and Yates standing in conversation with the smoothly built, black-haired man who had talked out of turn in the Bank Saloon back in San Ysidor.

The talk about the fire was restrained. Tragedy hung over the camp. Ordinarily the riders would have been recounting their experiences during the run. Now they spoke briefly, their own past danger forgotten in the pall that hung about the wagons. Carlisle, Yates and Smith, who had stood a short distance away from the rest, approached the fire and stopped.

"You all know what happened," Slippery Smith said curtly. "We've got to bury Mac first an' then we've got to gather cattle."

No one moved or spoke. Carlisle advanced half a step. "Mr. Smith will give the orders for both crews while we're working cattle," he announced. "Shotridge, you and Benbow take spades and dig a grave up there by the live oaks."

"You can borrow our spade, Benbow," Smith offered. "Get it for him, Sam."

One of the Smith riders walked off toward the wagon. Rusty got the spade from the Watrous wagon and stood waiting until Joe came back. Benbow wore a scowl on his face but neither he nor Rusty made comment as they walked toward the motte of trees. Rusty had quarreled with Scott McBride, forced his presence on him, watched him and had seen his weakness—now he was to help dig McBride's grave.

Up by the live-oak motte, out from it so that they would not dig through roots, the two fell to work cutting sod. They marked out an oblong, cut the sods from it and, sweating and in silence, delved into the rich earth beneath the grass. All along the trail there were graves such as the one they were digging, graves unmarked and unadorned, graves that contained the bodies of men who had gone up the trail for the last time. Down into the earth they dug, Rusty and Benbow, their spades flashing in the sunlight that had come, sweat glistening on their foreheads, blisters forming on their hands from the unaccustomed labor.

Slippery Smith appeared above them and looked down. "Deep enough, I reckon," he announced.

Benbow and Rusty climbed out. They stood leaning on their spades while the two trail crews came up the hill. Four men carried a tarpaulin-wrapped bundle on their shoulders and deposited it beside the newly turned earth. Saddle ropes came into play and the bundle was lowered into the grave.

"Anybody know a prayer?" Smith demanded.

For a moment no one moved, then Joe Deems stepped forward. "Ain't exactly a prayer," he growled. "I know the Twenty-third Psalm."

Smith nodded. Battered hats were pulled from long, unkempt hair. Joe Deems' voice rasped in the quiet.

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want—"

A man stirred. Over in the live-oak motte a bird fluttered from one branch to another.

" . . . And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Deems' rasping voice stopped. Somebody growled, deep in his chest: "Amen." Telesfor crossed himself. The silence held for a moment and then Slippery Smith said: "When you get through fillin' the grave, come down to camp."

That was all. Shoveling loose earth back into the grave, Rusty let the damp clods slip from his shovel blade and considered events. Benbow had left his spade and Gil Travis, assuming it without command, worked beside Rusty.

"I've saw worse funerals," Travis commented. "Several. Who do you reckon would've thought that Deems could quote Bible talk?"

Rusty did not answer. He was rounding the mound, placing sods on it. The sods would root and the grass would grow, but Scott McBride would not ride again.

CHAPTER IX

CATTLE COUNT

SLIPPERY SMITH, assuming command of the roundup, dispatched riders to the north and west. The storm had come from the east and naturally most of the cattle, when the run was finished, would have drifted with it. Seemingly no one but Rusty had stayed with and held a bunch. Others spoke of hav-

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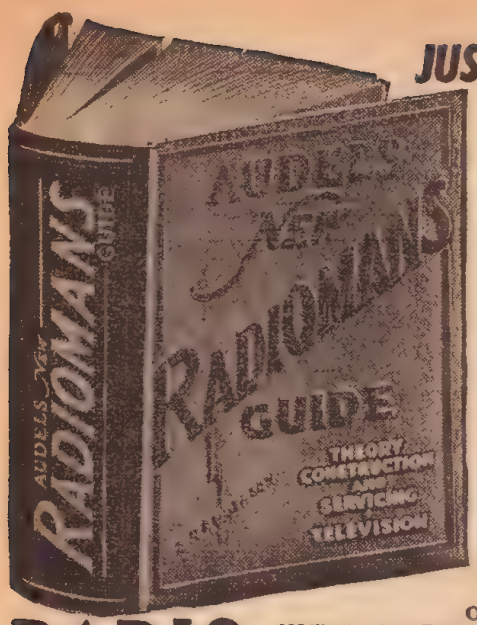

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ing been with a bunch of cattle but, unable to hold them, the cattle were spilled. Apparently there were Hackamore cattle and LM cattle all over the country.

Rusty and Gil Travis were sent north and east to see if there were any animals east of the ridge. They found none but, despite Rusty's expostulations, Travis kept going. Rusty was positive that no animals would have gone so far as he and Travis went on their circle. He lost his temper finally and told Travis that he was going back, and that Travis could go on if he wanted to. Instead of arguing, Travis turned and went back with Rusty, but it was sundown before they reached camp.

They saw, as they came in, that a sizable herd had been collected about the nucleus that Rusty and Benbow had thrown together in the morning. Rusty was tired, hungry and angry, and he had nothing to say when he reached camp. Travis made his report to Smith and Carlisle.

A spirit of depression hung over the camp. There was no talking, no banter among the riders. That night men from both outfits stood guard and the single big herd was circled throughout the night by four riders. The following morning the gather was resumed. This time Rusty was sent southeast on a circle, accompanying a laconic rider from Smith's outfit. They worked out that southeastern country, finding no cattle or sign of cattle.

Well south and east of the wagons Rusty did encounter sign of the passage of four horses. These had been ridden for they went on a straight line and, examining the tracks, Rusty believed that they had been made by the four visitors, Kansas, Chico, Gus, Red, who had dropped in on the Watrous wagons the day prior to the run. He had no definite reason for this idea; it was simply a possibility. When he and his companion

came back to the camp once more it was almost as late as on the previous day. Once more Rusty was tired and angry. He had been sent on a fool's errand, or so it seemed.

The talk that night was more lively. The depression caused by McBride's death was wearing off. Coming in to camp Rusty noted that someone had fashioned a cross from two live-oak trunks and had driven the cross at the head of the boss' grave.

He listened to the conversation about the camp, but took no part in it. The men of both outfits seemed to think that all the cattle had been gathered. Rusty saw Yates and Smith talking together at the end gate of Smith's wagon and when that conversation broke up, Yates sought Carlisle and talked with him. That conversation too, broke up. Carlisle went over to talk to Smith, and Yates came to the fire where the others were assembled. He squatted down beside it, rolled a cigarette and, singling out Benbow as the person to whom he spoke, but in reality speaking to all, made an announcement:

"Carlisle's goin' to take McBride's place himself," Yates stated. "For a while he thought that he'd put me in charge, but I talked him out of it. They're his cattle an' he ought to be the boss. I told him I'd help him out but that he ought to run the outfit." Yates paused and looked around at the other Watrous men. There was no comment from any of the crew. Carlisle, leaving Smith, came over to the group.

"I been tellin' the boys that you'd take the herd on, Mr. Carlisle," Yates said.

Carlisle nodded briskly. "That's right," he announced. "After all they're my cattle, mine and Colonel Watrous'. Tomorrow we'll cut the herd and then trim up and make a count."

That was cowman talk. Rusty wondered who had put it in Carlisle's mouth.

"Honey will be my segundo," Carlisle continued. "Has anyone any questions?"

There were no questions. Of course there were none. Rusty turned from his fellows and sought his bed. Sitting on his tarp still damp from the rain, he wondered who had ribbed Carlisle up to assuming command. The young fool had about as much business setting up for a trail boss as— Rusty tugged savagely at a boot—as— Well, there just wasn't any simile for it. The boot came off with a jerk.

THE following morning the two outfits cut cattle. Rusty did not work in the herd. He was on the north side of the bunch, holding. Smith, as was proper, cut to the south, so maintaining his respective position to the trail, and the Watrous outfit cut to the north.

The men working the herd used a liberal rule. Whenever they found a number of cattle, most of which bore the Watrous brand, together at the edge of the herd, they sliced off that bunch and threw it to the cut. Both herds would be retrimmed anyhow and there was no use in trying to work out one individual animal now.

Cattle came out of the main bunch in streams and were thrown to the cuts. Gradually the cuts grew and the mixed herd thinned down until finally there was no mixed herd left. Then Yates, Benbow and Carlisle trimmed the Hackamore herd while Smith and two of his riders performed a like service for the Watrous bunch. The few animals that did not belong where they were found,

were re-cut and put in their respective herds.

Rusty saw Smith shake hands with Carlisle and Yates and go back to his herd, and Carlisle trotted off toward the north while Yates came around the herd.

"We'll string 'em out for a count," he announced when he reached Rusty, "an' then move along a piece. Carlisle wants to get clear of Smith so they can't get together again."

Rusty made no comment. The herd needed water, he knew, and there should be a distance put between the two outfits, but he doubted Carlisle's ability to count.

The cattle were strung out. Yates had loped up and was sitting his horse opposite Carlisle. As the cattle began to file between the two men, Rusty—in the rear—noted that something was wrong. For a moment he was not sure, and then it came home to him that there were too few cattle. There was a bunch missing, Rusty could have sworn to it. Still he said nothing, but shoved cattle along toward the counters.

The last of the steers filed between Carlisle and Yates, and Yates rode over to his companion. Rusty, of course, was with the steers. He was examining them in earnest now, riding along the edge of the herd, picking out markers. Some he found, but several were missing. Now he was certain that the herd was short. He wondered if Carlisle had caught the shortage in the count. Carlisle and Yates rode up, and Yates, with a sweep of his arm, signaled the men on the north side to let the steers go. Apparently they were going to string out on the trail. Rusty sat his horse and looked at Carlisle, at Yates, and at the moving steers. Nugget, coming up beside him, spoke briefly.

"We're short some."

"I know it," Rusty answered.

Nugget swore. "Must have missed some when we gathered," he said. "I'm goin' to tell Carlisle."

"Carlisle counted 'em," Rusty pointed out.

"He couldn't count a pen of rabbits!" Nugget rasped. "Come on, Shotridge."

Automatically Rusty followed him. They reached Carlisle and stopped. Carlisle looked at them questioningly.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Nugget cleared his throat. "I been talkin' to Shotridge," he said apologetically. "I looked at the herd an' there's some markers missin'. How did they count out, Mr. Carlisle?"

Yates had come back and was stopped beside Carlisle. Benbow and two other men were coming over to join the group. Rusty waited for Carlisle's answer.

"I can count cattle," Carlisle said crisply. "The herd tallied out, Nugget. They're all there."

Nugget looked at Rusty, a question in his eyes. Benbow and the other two joined the group, falling into place behind Yates. Yates was watching Rusty and Nugget narrowly.

"But—" Nugget began.

"Yates and I got the same count," Carlisle announced with asperity. "There isn't a steer missing. We've moving cattle, Nugget. You'd better get to your job."

Ben Nugget was an old man and he backed down. Wordlessly he turned his horse and started off. Rusty remained alone, confronting the others.

"How about you, Shotridge?" Yates demanded, staring at Rusty. "You think we missed our count?"

Rusty sized up the odds. There

were three men besides Yates confronting him, three men who would obey Yates, who took orders from him. Carlisle had missed the count, and Yates had fooled him; Rusty knew that. He knew too, that Carlisle would not believe anything that he might say, that the enmity that lay between them precluded any chance of Carlisle's believing him. He also knew that Yates and the three hard-eyed men who sat behind him were ready to go to war. There was no chance of being believed and no chance of coming out of trouble if it started. Rusty Shotridge was no fool. He grinned sardonically at Yates and his voice was drawling when he spoke:

"You counted 'em, Yates. You ought to know how many there are. I just work here."

"Then why don't you get to work?" Yates snapped.

"Right now," Rusty said placidly, "I'm on my way." He wheeled his horse and loped off. Behind Yates, Benbow made a swift movement that was checked as Yates turned and shook his head. Reluctantly Benbow dropped his hand from the gun.

"Just a trouble maker, Mr. Carlisle," Yates said smoothly. "If there was any way of gettin' rid of him I'd do it."

CHAPTER X

MUTINY!

THE herd did not move far during the short time that was left of the day. The steers were thrown on water, a little creek that, rain-swollen, cut through the country, flowing toward the Canadian. When the cattle were watered they crossed the stream and bedded on high ground.

After supper, with no word of explanation to anyone, Honey Yates took a horse and rode back south. Rusty maintained his own counsel,

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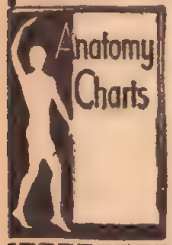

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watching the others with narrowed, questioning eyes. Ben Nugget talked to Joe Deems. Save for McBride's absence, the appearance and conduct of the camp was as usual. But there was an undercurrent of unrest, an indefinable feeling of something amiss. Rusty sensed that there was a break coming. When it came he would be in the middle of it. He had stuck out his neck when he went to Carlisle and Yates with Nugget.

Roughly, Rusty estimated, there were five hundred head of cattle short from the herd. Those cattle were somewhere back along the way. Rusty debated with himself. There was not much that he could do about it. His knowledge was a worthless thing. Carlisle, in his arrogance, would not listen to anything that Rusty Shotridge might have to say. And Yates must have helped steal those cattle; else why had he made the short count come out true? Not only had Yates helped steal the cattle, but he also had the backing of every man with the bunch with the exception of Rusty, Telesfor, Nugget and Deems. Carlisle did not count, and Gil Travis was doubtful. Still, Rusty told himself, there had been trouble between Travis and Benbow so maybe Gil was not on Yates' side.

Turning from general considerations, Rusty directed his thoughts to his own predicament. Certainly he was in a tight, between a rock and a hard spot. Yates was aware now that Rusty knew the herd was short. Just how long Rusty would be allowed to live and carry that dangerous knowledge was problematical. Certainly he and Ben Nugget could not be allowed to get to Dodge City. If he wanted to look after his own hide, the thing for Rusty Shotridge to do was to pull out.

Rusty thought about that for a time, then he shook his head. He

couldn't just get up and leave, and he knew it. He had promised to meet Bud Sigloe in Dodge City. Suppose he turned up in Dodge City after deserting his outfit? What would Bud say and think? What would Tom Flanders think? And, too, there was his promise to Ellen. He couldn't quit the herd and look after Carlisle too. He couldn't look after Carlisle anyhow, Rusty told himself ruefully; the young fool was too high-headed to be looked after.

No, the only thing to do was stick along for a while and see what happened. Likely what would happen would be a bullet in the back for Rusty Shotridge. He would have to look out for that. So deciding, Rusty pulled his bed over close to the chuck wagon and rolled it out. There were two men beside Nugget in the outfit that he could trust. Nugget was not much force, but Telesfor and Joe Deems might make full hands if trouble came. Joe Deems carried a shotgun in the wagon and was an old pup and full of poison.

Rusty looked around to locate the cook. Deems had Carlisle off to one side talking to the younger man, and now and then the old cook wagged his pipe stem by way of emphasis. Deems was laying down the law. Maybe, Rusty thought without much hope, Carlisle would believe Deems. It was a cinch that the young fool wouldn't believe Rusty Shotridge.

Deems finished his talking and came back to the wagon. He crawled under it, spread down his own bed and, without a word or glance at Rusty, turned in. Not until Deems was under his tarp did he speak; then his comment was terse: "We'll count again in the mornin'."

Rusty grunted. Trouble was postponed until morning anyhow.

HONEY YATES, leaving the Watrous wagon, rode back along the trail, crossed the creek and, within a mile or two, found Slippery Smith's camp. He announced his advent by a call from the darkness and when Smith stood up beside the fire, came riding in. Smith walked out to Yates as the latter dismounted.

"Why did you come back, Honey?" he demanded. "Trouble in your bunch?"

"Shotridge an' Nugget," Yates answered succinctly. "They come up right after we'd finished countin'. They both know the herd's short."

"What did Carlisle do?"

"He took my count. The young fool can't count cattle. He never missed the bunch we got. He hates Shotridge's guts an' he wouldn't listen to him."

Smith nodded. "Yo're goin' to have to get shed of Shotridge an' Nugget," he drawled. "Can't you handle that, Honey?"

There was a small, chiding reproach in his tone and Yates bristled. "I can handle him anytime," he snarled. "The thing I come back for is this, Slippery: With McBride dead, why don't we just take the whole works? Why fool with five hundred head or so when we can have 'em all?"

Smith scratched his chin thoughtfully. "It might be a good idea at that," he drawled. "How would you work it, Honey?"

"We got to get rid of Shotridge anyhow; why not Carlisle, too?" Yates demanded. "Hang it, we're in the Nations. Most anything could happen to him."

"It would be mighty hard to ex-

plain at Dodge City," Smith reminded.

"Take the cattle on north to Montana then," countered Yates. "Don't stop at Dodge City. Go on with 'em."

"I'll think it over," Smith promised. "We're goin' to brand the Hackamore on what we got yesterday. That'll take awhile but you won't be goin' so fast that we won't catch up. Let me scheme a little, Honey. I think we can do it."

"Of course we can," Yates said flatly. "We'd have to split with the boys, but what of it? We're goin' to have to pay them off anyhow. An' if things get out I ain't goin' to worry. Not when I'm runnin' my own place in Canada, I ain't."

"It might work," Smith said again. "I tell you, Honey: I'll come up tomorrow or the next day an' pay you a visit. How about that?"

"If you don't come in, I'm goin' to take 'em myself," Yates warned. "I'll talk to the boys an' they'll throw in with me. You better come along pretty quick, Slippery."

"Tomorrow or the next day," Smith promised again. "I think I'll go with you, Honey. I think I will."

Honey Yates grunted. "Then break out yore bottle an' we'll have a drink on it," he said. "I'm dry as dust, ridin' herd on that bunch of kids an' bein' nice to Carlisle. Doggone him, every time I speak to him it pretty near chokes me. The danged stuck-up brat!"

Smith laughed. "Come on an' I'll give you that drink," he said goodnaturedly. "You need it."

Yates did not stay long after drinking. He talked a little further to Slippery and then, mounting his horse, rode back north. He had been unable to exact a definite promise from Smith and he did not much care. Honey Yates was becoming possessed of delusions of grandeur. If Slippery Smith did not want to throw in with him there were others who would. Back at the Watrous camp there were men who obeyed him and who would listen to his ideas. If Smith turned down the proposition, Honey Yates was ready to carry it through alone. Two thousand big steers, sold in Montana, would bring a nice price, and from Montana it was just a step across the line into Canada. Yates' eyes narrowed and the tip of his tongue touched his lips as he anticipated the wealth that was coming his way. When he reached the Watrous camp he staked his horse and went to bed. Tomorrow he would talk things over with the boys.

Rusty Shotridge heard Yates come in. There had been a reshuffling of the guard, due to Yates' absence, and the fact that Carlisle, having promoted himself, no longer stood guard. Carlisle had changed the watches but Rusty still held his old place with Travis, the midnight shift.

AT midnight, wakened by the man he was to relieve, Rusty got up and rode out to the cattle. Toughy was played out and Rusty had shifted over to Big Enough for a night horse. He rode the sorrel, Travis close beside him, until they reached the cattle and then, relieving the man who had stayed with the steers, began his endless circling, singing softly as he rode. Rested now, after their run, the steers might take another notion to jump the bed ground. Rusty did not think that they would, for they were broken to the trail and had held well during the storm; in fact they had held until Slippery Smith's cattle came down on them.

Riding circle around the steers,

Rusty fell to thinking about that stampede. McBride had taken his outfit off the regular trail. So too had Smith. Rusty wondered if there was any connection between the facts. Seemingly there was. Slippery Smith, Rusty thought, was the likely man to have those missing steers. He wondered what Smith hoped to do with them.

Slippery Smith! He didn't come by that name of Slippery through chance. Back at the Red River Crossing the trail cutter had said that Slippery came by his name honestly. Likely Smith had already figured out some way of handling those steers. Rusty thought about that too. Grimly he smiled. It was almost a certainty that the success of Slippery's scheme would depend upon Rusty Shotridge's not reaching Dodge City. But Rusty intended to reach Dodge City. Out there in the darkness, alone save for the steers and Gil Travis over on the other side of the herd, Rusty nodded to himself. Yes sir! Regardless of Slippery Smith or Honey Yates or any of their followers, he was going to reach Dodge City. And when he got there he'd see the thing clear through. Not only on account of Colonel Watrous and Ellen, but just to show Leonard Carlisle and his sister that he was a man. He'd show them. Particularly Marcia Carlisle. He'd sure show *her!*

When he met Travis on the next round Rusty suggested a smoke. They retired a little distance from their charges and, having rolled and lighted their cigarettes, sat for a short time in silent communion.

"Carlisle's goin' to count the herd again tomorrow mornin', Gil," Rusty announced finally.

Travis was silent for half a dozen heart beats. Then: "I wouldn't do it if I was him," he said quietly.

Rusty nodded. It was evident now that Travis was in with Yates and the rest. Rusty had suspected as much.

"Mebbe," Rusty said softly, "a man'll have a chance to show where he stands, Gil. That might happen tomorrow mornin'."

Travis made no reply. Rusty's voice was still soft. "What was it you was goin' to say about Scott McBride the other night? You said somethin' about not listenin' to a fellow, an' then you stopped. Was it mebbe that you didn't think much of a fellow that had sold out his boss?"

Still Travis did not answer. Rusty carefully ground out his cigarette against the horn of his saddle. "You been takin' Colonel Watrous' wages for quite a while, Gil," he drawled. "Well, I'm goin' round again." He rode off, leaving Travis alone in the darkness, his location marked only by the tiny glow of his cigarette.

When finally the two were relieved, Rusty rode in to camp to find that Travis had gone to bed without waiting to drink a cup of coffee with him. Rusty sighed as he sat down and pulled off his boots. He had not got very far with Gil Travis.

In the morning the men went about their accustomed tasks. The horses came in and were penned. Events went on as usual. Joe Deems called the crew to breakfast and as the men selected their plates and cups and went to the fire for food, Rusty, last in line, stopped and looked to the east. There were riders silhouetted against the eastern light, four men that came on apace. Rusty stepped out for a clearer view.

"Company comin'," he announced.

The riders came on and stopped, just away from the wagon. They

were the same quartet that had once before visited the trail crew; Kansas, Red, Gus and Chico. Kansas grinned a laconic grin and swung down from his mount.

"Howdy," he drawled. "Me an' the boys got flooded out. We thought mebbe we could get a meal off you."

It was Carlisle who answered. "Get down," he invited. "Breakfast is just ready."

The other three outlaws dismounted and approached the wagon. When their plates were filled and they had formed a little group, backs against the wagon, Kansas spoke again.

"Where's McBride?"

"Killed," Carlisle answered briefly, and continued, relating the events of the last few days.

"That's sure too bad," Kansas commented when Carlisle had finished. "I liked the old boy. I'd heard a lot about him. Who's runnin' the spread now?"

"I am," Carlisle answered.

The crew had finished breakfast and, as though recalled to the duties of his position by Kansas' question, Carlisle turned toward his men.

"We'll line out for a count as we go off the bed ground this morning," he announced, looking at Yates. "Nugget, you'll count with me."

THE announcement was a bombshell to Honey Yates. He had not expected or anticipated it, but he reacted instantly and typically.

"Ain't you satisfied with the count we got yesterday?" he demanded.

"No, I'm not," Carlisle answered bluntly. He could not quite bring himself to say that he had lost track in the counting and had taken Yates' figures. Leonard Carlisle had not yet reached the point where he could confess his inadequacy. He continued to stare at Yates.

The latter scowled. "There's no need of it," he said. "I got a count yesterday. There's no need of the extra work."

Behind Yates those who were his men formed into a compact little group, Benbow and the rest. They too were scowling. Nugget and Deems were at the front of the wagon. Rusty shifted until he was behind Carlisle and a little to his left. Gil Travis was by the fire and the four outlaws remained beside the wagon, Kansas and Chico leaning their backs against the rear wheel.

"Is there any reason why we shouldn't count the cattle?" demanded Carlisle.

"There ain't no use of it," Yates insisted. "We got 'em counted. It's just a fool idea of yores, Carlisle."

Carlisle flushed angrily. "I'm beginning to think Nugget was right. I think the count is short. I think you lied to me, Yates."

Dead silence followed the words. Rusty watched Yates narrowly. Carlisle wore a gun but Rusty realized that the youth would be helpless if it came to using weapons. As far as Carlisle was concerned, that gun at his hip was just an invitation to death.

"We'll count them," Carlisle stated flatly.

Rusty shifted his eyes momentarily from Yates to Travis and then back again. This was a showdown and he needed Travis.

"You been takin' wages a long time, Gil," he drawled smoothly. "It's time you made up your mind."

Travis moved. Very slowly he left the fire and advanced. Momentarily no one could be sure of the group he chose to join, of the leadership he would follow. Then he shifted his course, turning toward

Carlisle and Rusty.

Rusty was watching Yates. He did not see Benbow's sudden action. Snatching his gun from his hip, Benbow half turned and fired, all in one fluid motion. Travis, advancing, was struck by the heavy slug high in the breast. He took one more half-step and pitch-rolled down on his face.

As Travis went down, Benbow wheeled, leveling his gun toward Carlisle. Yates, as surprised as anyone else by Benbow's act, had his hand halfway to his own hip. Before he could draw, Rusty had whipped two shots into Benbow's thick middle and, crouched, was confronting the others.

Benbow dropped, limp as an empty sack, his weapon—still hot with smoke coming from it—falling fractionally before his body. Joe Deems had dragged his shotgun from under the wagon seat and with both hammers cocked, leveled it at Yates and his followers. Nugget, now that the action was finished, pulled his weapon.

Rusty's eyes were very narrow and his voice was very thin as he turned to Honey Yates.

"You want a little of this, Yates?"

For answer Honey lowered his hand. He knew what Rusty meant and he was not a fool. Honey Yates would not buck certain death.

Over by the wagon Joe Deems' crusty voice rasped a command. "Unbuckle them belts an' step out of 'em. There's buckshot in both barrels of this. Shed yore guns if you don't want some of it."

Again it was Yates who led the way. Surprise had given place to anger on his face. But he was not

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so angry that he would take chances. His left hand slowly came up to the buckle of his gun belt and released it. Gun and belt thudded down. Behind him the others also obeyed Deems' order. They were confronted by Rusty with a leveled Colt and flanked by Deems, the shotgun, and Ben Nugget. Carlisle stood helpless, his hand resting on his gun butt. He had not drawn the weapon.

"That's right," Deems commanded. "Now walk away from 'em."

Yates and his followers obeyed, taking short steps, like angry dogs whipped away from a victim.

"What do you want 'em to do now, Shotridge?" demanded Deems.

"Keep on walkin'," Rusty said flatly. "Just keep at it, Yates. You'll find your saddles an' beds here when you get back. Your friends are down below the creek. I guess they'll take care of you."

"You'd set a man afoot in this country?" Yates demanded. "Damn you, Shotridge! I'll get you for this! I'll—"

"You'll keep walkin' till you find your friend Smith," Rusty rasped. "He'll look after you, an' you know where he is. We'll leave your beds an' saddles right here. You can pick 'em up when you come along with Smith."

Yates took another step and stopped. "I'll—" he began.

Old Joe Deems gestured meaningly with the shotgun. "Vamoose!" he ordered.

SLOWLY, looking back, voicing their anger in threats and curses, Honey Yates and the men who followed him, walked out of the camp. They tramped on down the slope below the wagons and the fire. They disappeared behind a clump of trees at the foot of the slope and when they were gone Rusty Shotridge let his breath go in a long sigh,

and relaxed. He turned to face Carlisle.

"We're short of cattle," Rusty began, meeting Carlisle's eyes. "Yates was in on it. He counted—" Rusty shopped short. Over by the wagon a man laughed and, wheeling, Rusty faced toward the sound. Chico was grinning and there were broad smiles on the faces of Gus and Red. Kansas was frankly venting his mirth.

"What's so danged funny?" Rusty said sharply.

Kansas broke his laugh and fought his face to soberness. "Them fellers," he answered Rusty.

"An' what's funny about them?"

Kansas grinned. His eyes met Rusty's, amazed friendliness filling them. "They was so damned surprised," he said. "They was all ready for you an' then they wasn't." He chuckled again. "An' they're goin' to be surprised when they look for Slippery Smith too," he concluded.

"Why?" Rusty demanded.

"Because," Kansas began and then fell to laughing again.

"Let us in on it," Rusty rasped. "Why are they goin' to be surprised when they look for Smith?"

"Because ol' Eagle Claws' bucks jumped Slippery last night an' run his cattle to hell an' gone west," Kansas explained, the sparkle in his eyes belying the gravity of his tone. "Me an' the boys come past Smith's camp this mornin' before we come here. Smith an' his whole outfit are out lookin' for the cattle an' the cook is movin' camp west. Them boys you run out are goin' to have a mighty long walk." Kansas broke once more into laughter. Chico's small face was seamed with his amusement and Gus and Red joined in the merriment. Slowly the predicament of Honey Yates and his cohorts was borne home to Rusty Shotridge. A grin spread all across his own face.

"Well," he said slowly. "Well—"

Leaving Kansas and his men to their laughter, he turned again toward Carlisle. The latter had not, seemingly, recovered from the shock of the violent action about him. His face was white and his eyes showed his fright. Rusty sobered. Beyond Carlisle he could see Benbow sprawled on the ground, and to Benbow's left Gil Travis lay very still and quiet. The sight of the bodies was like the shock of cold water thrown in Rusty's face. He walked past Carlisle and stopping beside Travis, looked down at the man. Travis was dead; had died before he struck the ground.

"He picked his side," Rusty announced, looking up from Gil's body. "He was goin' to come in with us."

"What will we do?" Carlisle's voice was unsteady. "What will we do now? We haven't any men. We've got the cattle to look after. What will we do?"

The man's words brought full realization of their plight to Rusty Shotridge. What *would* they do? He had driven Honey Yates and his fellows out of camp. Momentarily he, Carlisle, Deems, Nugget and Telesfor were safe. But there was a bunch of big steers to look after, steers that even now needed attendance. They were miles from their destination, miles from any place where help could be found. And down below them, scattered now but sure to come together, there were triple—no quadruple—their number of enemies. Rusty met Carlisle's eyes and his own were blank as he comprehended their predicament. For a long moment he stood so, then his lips closed firmly and a light of determination lanced into his eyes. He turned toward Kansas.

"You say you were washed out by the storm?" he demanded.

Kansas nodded. A glint of comprehension sprang into his eyes but he remained silent. The other three outlaws, Chico, Gus and Red, were looking questioningly at Rusty.

"You're out of grub," Rusty said slowly. "You've got no camp. We've got grub an' what goes with it, an' we're short of hands. How about it?"

Kansas appeared to chew mentally on the question. He looked at Rusty and then at Carlisle. He turned and questioned his fellows with his eyes. Then his gaze settled on Rusty once more.

"You the boss?" Kansas queried finally.

"I—" Rusty began and stopped. He turned a trifle so that he could see Carlisle. The youth was watching him narrowly and it was apparent that he was about to speak. Then and there Rusty Shotridge made his decision. Carlisle could not get in with the steers, he could not take this remnant of an outfit across the country. He would be hard pressed to take care of himself, let alone a herd of cattle and a crew of men. It was definitely up to Rusty.

"I'm the boss," Rusty rasped and with his eyes he dared Carlisle to object. Over beside the wagon Joe Deems sighed with relief and Kansas grinned slowly.

"I guess me an' the boys could go a ways with you then," he announced. "Yeah, I guess we could. We kind of like yore style."

CHAPTER XI

RUSTLER'S PARLEY

WHEN Rusty answered Kansas' query and assumed responsibility of the herd, the weight of the world settled on his young shoulders. To Deems and Telesfor and Nugget that announcement came as a relief. To Carlisle it was a challenge. Worse, it was a challenge that he dared not accept.

Leonard Carlisle on one occasion had knocked Rusty down. Physically he was not afraid of the russet-haired, gray-eyed man, and yet he did fear him. He had seen Rusty in action, had seen the utter, devastating swiftness that had killed Benbow and cowed Honey Yates, had met the ruthless force that lay in Rusty. Carlisle could not argue against nor overcome those things so he said nothing.

Having assumed responsibility, Rusty gave commands. He knew the desperate necessity under which he operated. The fortuitous raid of the Comanches on Slippery Smith had given Rusty a little time, a breathing spell. But it was only a breathing spell. He was short-handed and he had a miracle to accomplish. Rusty knew that he was no worker of miracles, but he would make a try. Nugget and Chico, under his orders, went out to the cattle. The others were immediately employed in camp.

The horses of the mutineers were unsaddled, and saddles and bed rolls were piled together. Fresh mounts were selected from these animals for the recent recruits, and the rest of the horses went to the remuda. The weapons taken from Yates and his followers were put in the wagon.

There was no time for proper burial of the dead men. Travis and Benbow were wrapped in tarps and hoisted high into crotches of the live oak trees. An Indian burial was better than none at all, and while Rusty felt sorry about Travis, he knew that they must not linger any longer than necessary at the site. While his orders were being carried out, Rusty

held a consultation with Kansas.

The outlaw knew the country. He listened to Rusty's questions and answered them fully. The Canadian River was not far distant and Rusty wanted to put that water between him and Slippery Smith.

"We're goin' to curl our tails an' run," he said frankly. "You can't handle a herd of cattle an' fight. Some way you'll lose in a deal like that. Either we'd spill the steers or we'd lose the fight—an' we can't afford to do either."

Kansas knew that Rusty was right and that he was not afraid. There was a glint of admiration in the outlaw's eyes as he answered Rusty's questions.

The location of Slippery Smith and his men was of prime importance. Kansas was not definite as to that location. He knew, and reported to Rusty, something of what had happened to Smith. Eagle Claws' Comanches had sought beef and horses when they raided the Hackamore outfit. They had stampeded the cattle sometime after midnight. Just a little bunch of Indians, Kansas stated. Not more than eight or ten.

In talking to Smith's cook Kansas had learned that the Comanches had missed the Hackamore remuda but the cattle had run. Smith would gather cattle and he had moved his wagon west to make a base for his roundup. One or two days would suffice for Smith to collect the cattle, Kansas thought, and Rusty agreed with him.

Listening to Kansas, Rusty wished devoutly that Eagle Claws had been able to run off Smith's horses. That would have made the Watrous crew feel a great deal safer. When Honey Yates and his companions reached Smith, they would do two things: Arm themselves and get horses. Once that happened Rusty's brief respite would be over. Yates would never pass up such an opportunity as the Watrous trail herd offered, and

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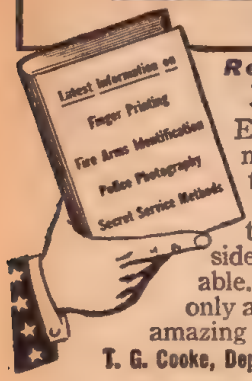

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it was entirely possible that Smith and his whole crew would throw in with Yates. Indeed, as he thought of it, Rusty could see that such a combination was not only possible but very probable. It stood to reason that Yates and Smith were partners in this conspiracy.

TO fight such a combination Rusty had three reliable men. Carlisle he discounted; Kansas and his fellows were an unknown quantity. At the moment they were with Rusty but he could not say with certainty that they would stay with him when the going got tough. Probably they wouldn't. Kansas, seeming to sense Rusty's thoughts, came over and joined him.

"You made a mistake," the outlaw stated without preamble.

"How was that?"

"You'll never have them fellers where you want 'em again. You should've let 'em have it."

Rusty met Kansas' eyes. "You'd have done that?" he drawled.

Kansas grinned. "No," he said equably. "I'd have done what you did. Just the same, you ought to have killed 'em. They'll make you plenty of grief."

"Where," Rusty demanded, "will you be when the grief hits us?"

Kansas grinned. "You got no way of knowin'," he drawled. "All you can do is wait an' find out. Right now we're with you an' we ought to be goin'."

That was true. Rusty gave Deems his orders and the wagon pulled out. Telesfor left with the remuda, and Rusty Shotridge, with a crew of six men, started the cattle.

They moved steadily throughout the day. Deems camped the wagon off the line of march at noon and, as the herd came past, men detached themselves one at a time, rode to the wagon, ate, changed horses, and returned to the herd. All through the

day Rusty anticipated trouble. None came. That night he told off the guard, long guards now, and spoke to Kansas and the other newcomers of the characteristics of the horses, helping them select their night horses.

All through the night Rusty remained alert, dozing occasionally, getting up to ride out to the herd, spending most of his time with the cattle. In the morning, before sunrise, the camp was awake and by full dawn the herd was moving.

At mid-morning Rusty dispatched Kansas ahead to the river. He had to know the stage of the water and Kansas was the logical pilot since he knew the country and the river crossings. The outlaw came back at noon bearing bad news. The Canadian was up, bank full and raging!

"We can't cross 'em," he told Rusty. "We'll have to lay over an' wait for the water to go down."

Here was sheer tragedy. Rusty had counted on being able to put the river between himself and his enemies. Leonard Carlisle came up while Rusty and Kansas consulted.

Since Rusty's assumption of authority, Carlisle had kept to himself. He had not tried to talk to Rusty but had held a conference with Joe Deems. In that conference Deems had bluntly told him that he was lucky, that Rusty was the man to handle affairs and that Carlisle had better keep his nose out of business he did not understand and could not handle. That had rankled.

As Carlisle stopped his horse Rusty turned to him. "The Canadian's up," he announced. "We can't cross."

Carlisle shrugged. "There's no particular hurry, is there?" he asked. "Or are you trying to make a record now that you've set yourself up as trail boss?"

Rusty stared at the man and a glint of anger came into his eyes. "I'm tryin' to save your investment," he drawled. "I thought that

would interest you." With no other word he turned back to Kansas, and Carlisle, feeling himself excluded, rode away after waiting a moment.

Kansas drawled a weary, "How do you figure it, Shotridge?"

"I don't know how to figure it," Rusty answered frankly. "We're tied up and we're going to have trouble. There's no use of you boys stayin' if you don't want to."

A trace of anger flitted across the outlaw's face. "Yo're hell on running men off," he drawled. "Don't you want us to stay?"

"You'd be mighty welcome."

"Then shut up about us not stayin'."

Rusty nodded his thanks and grinned. Kansas had told him and that was Kansas' right. After an instant the outlaw also grinned.

"It's the devil of a thing when a man's got to depend on horse thieves," he drawled.

"Good people to depend on sometimes," Rusty returned.

There was a brief silence. Then: "One thing's goin' to surprise 'em some," Kansas said. "They don't know we're with you."

A light broke over Rusty's face. "We might surprise 'em a little more," he declared. "How far will you go with me, Kansas?"

"You'd be most scared to death if you knew," the outlaw answered.

Rusty started his horse ahead. The cattle had caught up and were filing past. Kansas fell into place beside Rusty.

"Just how does the country lie ahead of us?" Rusty asked.

Kansas considered. "It's pretty flat," he answered. "There's some small hills an' some timber. The river comes down kind of southeast. It makes a bend an' the ford is just south of that. Only there ain't no ford now."

"Kind of a tongue of land with the river on both sides?" Rusty asked quickly.

Kansas nodded.

The light in Rusty's eyes became a definite glint of satisfaction. "We'll throw the herd out on that tongue," he stated. "Make camp right below it. That way the river will hold the cattle, won't it?"

Kansas was nodding. "On three sides," he agreed. "Two men can stay below 'em an' hold 'em as long as you want."

"An the only way they can get to us will be through the camp," Rusty announced with satisfaction. "That's what they'll want to do anyhow. Yates is goin' to make a try for me."

"That's right," agreed Kansas. "So?"

"So I'll be at the camp," Rusty said. "An' if you an' yore friends really want in on this you'll be off a piece, kind of hid out. An' when things start—"

"We'll get into it," Kansas completed. "An' somebody'll really get surprised. Let's get on to the river if we can. Can't understand why they ain't jumped us before now."

HONEY YATES and his followers were an angry, footsore crew when they reached the spot the Hackamore wagon had occupied. They had walked twelve miles and every mile had been filled with curses and recriminations. Yates had been blamed for their predicament, freely and frankly. If Yates had not hesitated, if he had gone to war when Benbow shot Travis, none of this would have happened. So claimed the limping, evil-tempered men who followed Yates south.

Honey paid no attention. Anger seethed within him, a consuming fire that deafened him to curses and complaints. That he, Honey Yates, gunman with a reputation that stretched from Kansas on down to Matamoras, had been outwitted and outgamed by a youngster, particularly a youngster whose prowess he had discounted, was almost more than Yates could stand. He cursed himself and raged inwardly, going over in his mind all his mistakes.

There in San Ysidor he had taken a chance with Rusty Shotridge and, because of Bud Sigloe and Tom Flanders, had failed. There were countless times along the trail when Yates could have killed Rusty. He had not taken advantage of the opportunities. Instead, satisfying his own catlike nature, he had played along, holding Rusty in contempt, certain that whenever he wanted to, he could eliminate the other man. And now here he was, disarmed and set afoot by that same russet-haired boy. A burning desire to avenge the insult, to set things even, filled Honey Yates. There was just one way that he could do that: kill Rusty Shotridge.

The footsore crew reached the site

of Smith's camp and found it deserted. Before them they could read all the signs of recent occupancy but there was no wagon and no men. Wheel tracks led west and that was all. Now the fury of the curses redoubled.

Yates faced his followers, his eyes blazing. Unarmed as he was, the men felt his fury. He was capable of killing and before his anger their own shrunk and became unimportant.

"We'll go on an' find Slippery," Yates snarled. "He's moved but we'll find him. When we do we'll get horses an' then we'll get that red-headed young rooster that put us afoot. Come on!"

One of the men had the temerity to object. "Honey—" he began, and then stopped short as Yates turned on him.

"You'll do what I say," Yates rasped. "All of you!"

There was no answer to that and, turning again, Yates set out along the wagon tracks.

These men were horsemen. They were neither shod nor trained for walking. They stumbled along in their boots, untrained muscles complaining, their feet tired and sore. Sometimes perforce they rested and at those times Yates cursed with a virulence that they neither comprehended nor believed possible. Six long miles from the deserted camp site they found Slippery Smith and

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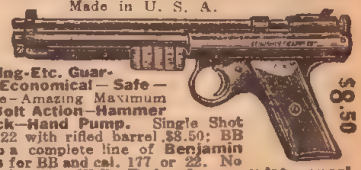

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the Hackamore wagon.

It was growing dusk when they came in. Groaning men dropped to the ground but Yates went on toward the wagon. Rising from his place, Slippery Smith came out to meet the other man. Smith's greeting was not such as soothed injured feelings.

'Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, what happened to you, Honey?"

"Never you mind what happened to me!" Yates snarled. "What happened to you an' why the devil did you move the wagon?"

Smith sensed the temper of the man. Honey Yates was in a killing rage. Slippery's reply was soothing. "Come on an' have somethin' to eat. You look like you'd had a hell of a time."

Yates sank down beside the fire. "I've had a hell of a time," he answered. "I'm goin' to kill that Shotridge if it's the last thing I do."

SMITH went to the wagon and came back bearing a bottle. "Have a drink, Honey," he said placatingly. "Have a drink an' tell me about it."

Yates took the bottle and drank deeply. "That doggoned Carlisle wasn't satisfied with the count," he rasped. "He wanted another count this mornin'. I stalled him. Travis, the double-crosser, went over to the other side an' Benbow shot him. Before I could move—before I knew what had happened—Shotridge killed Benbow an' was shakin' his

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gun in my face askin' if I wanted some of it. The cook dragged out a shotgun an' threw down on us. There wasn't a thing that we could do."

He drank again, finishing the bottle, and hurled it toward the fire. "They made us drop our guns an' set us afoot!" he raged. "We been walkin' all day, tryin' to find you. What in tarnation happened to you, Slippery?"

"I told you to get rid of Shotridge," Smith snapped. "I told you he was dangerous. You missed yore play at him in San Ysidor an' then you just fooled along with him. Why in hell didn't you kill him when you had the chance?"

"I'll 'tend to Shotridge," Yates snarled. "What I want to know is why you moved the wagon? You made us walk a million miles."

Smith grunted. Yates' attitude was not soothing to his own temper, never too good and very short at present. "We got jumped last night about midnight," he said. Blasted Comanches. There'd been a couple of 'em in here wantin' beef an' I run 'em off. They started the cattle an' went a-hellin'. I don't know how they missed the remuda but they did. We had everythin' fine, all my cattle gathered an' we'd begun brandin' some of the LM's. It was just like clockwork. An' then this had to happen! The damned soldiers can't keep them Comanches corraled at all. Why we pay taxes for an army I dunno! The only thing that saved our bacon was that the herd run into a creek an' turned the right way so we could mill 'em. We'd still be gatherin' cattle if it wasn't for that."

"You get 'em all?" Yates demanded.

"All but a few head."

The drink had strengthened and fortified Honey Yates. He glared at Slippery Smith. "We're goin' to get Shotridge," he rasped. "Him an'

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Carlisle an' all the rest. Then we're goin' to take the rest of them steers. They're goin' to pay for all the walkin' we done. Yo're comin' in with me, Slippery!"

Slippery Smith did not answer at

once. "I dunno," he said finally. "It's mighty risky, Honey."

Yates glared at his companion. "Are you gettin' cold feet? It's all you can do. If we don't stop Shotridge an' Carlisle now, we're finished. They ain't fools. They know their herd's short an' they know who's got the cattle they're missin'. They know you got 'em. You got no chance of gettin' to Dodge City an' sellin' your herd. Not if Shotridge an' Carlisle get there."

Smith shook his head dubiously. "Shotridge is shorthanded," he commented. "He ain't goin' to get to Dodge City in any hurry. An' anyhow I ain't goin' to Dodge City. You give me an idea, Honey. I'm goin' west from here. I'll strike the old Goodnight Trail an' go over into Colorado, maybe clear over into Utah. I can sell there just as good as I can at Dodge City."

Yates looked disgustedly at Slippery Smith. "I never thought that you was yellow," he snarled.

Smith flushed. "I ain't yellow," he refuted. "But I got a herd on my hands an' I got all them cattle we took to brand. I don't see the sense of riskin' what I got on the chance of gettin' some more. Not when there's another way out."

"Then I'll go it alone," Yates stated. I'll take what boys are with me an' get them cattle. I'll get Shotridge an' the rest, too. Yo're goin' to stake us to horses an' guns, Slippery. Yo're goin' to do that."

SLIPPERY SMITH was canny. As he had said, he could see no use for his taking further risks, particularly when he had an instrument at hand to take the risks for him. In a tight place Slippery Smith would stand and fight like a cornered rat, but this was not a tight place. Not yet.

"How many men has Shotridge got?" he questioned.

"There's him an' Carlisle an' Nugget," answered Yates. "Then there's the horse wrangler an' the cook. That's all. I don't need yore help, Slippery. All I need from you is horses an' guns."

Pursing his lips, Slippery Smith nodded. "I'll let you have 'em," he said. "There's some spare guns, I guess. I got a extra Colt myse'f. But see here, Honey: If I give you horses an' guns I got to have a cut of what you get."

Honey Yates tipped back and glared. "You sure got a nerve!" he rasped. "You want a cut an' don't do a danged thing to get it!"

"I lend the horses an' the guns," Smith stated quietly. "You can't get no place without 'em."

It was true and Yates knew it.

Nevertheless he continued to glare at his companion. The other foot-sore members of Yates' party were limping into the camp now. The cook was busy and Smith's riders were clustered about the newcomers. There was a good deal of talk, a good many angry curses.

"All right," Yates snarled. "You'll get a cut. But I want them horses an' guns."

Slippery Smith nodded his satisfaction. Honey Yates would try to double-cross him he knew. He must make plans and provisions to prevent that.

"Let's eat," he suggested. "We can talk some more then an' scheme things out. You can't do nothin' till tomorrow anyhow, Honey."

For answer Yates got up and took two limping steps toward the fire.

"Mebbe not," he rasped. "But tomorrow evenin', just about sundown, I'm goin' to do plenty. I'm goin' to take that outfit, an' I'm goin' to get Shotridge alive."

He sauntered back from the fire and stopped, his eyes boring down into Smith's upturned face. Slippery Smith was hard himself but, momentarily, he recoiled from the blazing-eyed man who stared down at him. He knew Yates' reputation, did Slippery Smith, knew the coldblooded fierceness of the man,

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knew him for what he was: a ruthless, merciless killer.

"What'll you do, Honey?" Smith's voice was so low as to be almost a whisper.

Yates laughed, one short, harsh bark of sound that had no mirth in it. "Do?" he snarled. "What do you think I'll do? You ever seen a man after the Comanches had finished with him? You ever see a man that had been staked out on an ant hill an' his eyelids cut off so that he had to look at the sun? You ever see a man try to walk when his skin had been ripped off him an' his guts was draggin' on the ground? I'll get Shotridge alive, an' before I finish with him he'll cuss his mother for havin' him. You stick around. You'll see what I'll do!"

Slippery Smith could not take his eyes from Yates. The terrible ferocity of the man charmed him as a snake charms a bird. "You can't do that, Honey," he said, his voice barely a murmur. "Man, you ain't human. You—"

Smith's voice trailed off. He did not finish the sentence he had begun. He knew, sitting there looking up at the man who towered above him, that Honey Yates meant every word he said. He knew that Honey Yates would carry out the vengeance he had planned, carry it out to the bitter end. He could not stop Yates. Nothing could stop him. No one. Slippery's smooth shoulders shuddered involuntarily, and he lowered his eyes.

"You wait an' see," rasped Honey Yates. "Just wait, Slippery. An' don't you try to stop me!"

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